

'School Choice' and Disenfranchising the Public

By **Peter Greene**

Teacher and writer; blogger, curmudgucation.blogspot.com

Posted: 01/05/2015 11:45 pm EST Updated: 01/05/2015 11:59 pm EST

"School choice" is one of those policy ideas that just never goes away, and it probably never will. For some people it is an irresistible way to unlock all those public tax dollars and turn them into private profits. For others it's a way to make sure their children don't have to go to school with "those people." Other people are justifiably attracted to the idea of more control over their child's education. And still others have a sincere belief that competition really does create greatness.

Voucher fans and proponents of modern charters like to focus on those promises. They're much quieter about one of the other effects of a choice system.

School choice disenfranchises the public.

Our public school system is set up to serve the public. All the public. It is not set up to serve just parents or just students. Everybody benefits from a system of roadways in this country - even people who don't drive cars -- because it allows a hundred other systems of service and commerce to function well.

School choice treats parents as if they are the only stakeholders in education. They are not. We all depend on a society in which people are reasonably well-educated. We all depend on a society in which people have a reasonably good understanding of how things work. We all depend on a society in which people have the basic abilities needed to take care of themselves and the people around them. We all depend on dealing with doctors and plumbers and lawyers and clerks and neighbors who can read and write and figure. We hope for fellow voters who will not elect a politician because he promises to convert straw to gold by using cold fusion. We all depend on a society that can move forward because it is composed of people who know things.

This is why everybody votes for school board members -- not just the people who have kids in school. Everybody has a stake in the students who come out of schools, and every taxpayer has a stake in the money spent on schools.

A choice system says, "No, you only get a say in how education works if you have a kid."

Reformers like to make the argument that schools need to be more responsive to what employers and businesses are looking for in graduates, but in a choice system these

employers have even less say than they currently do. Charter operators and other choice beneficiaries don't have to listen to anybody except the people who affect market share.

This has the potential of serious long-term harm for the choice schools themselves. Most notably, disenfranchising the public literally removes them from the list of stakeholders. It will vastly increase the list of people saying, "Well, I don't have a kid in school. Why do I have to pay taxes anyway?" The day those people make a large enough group is the day that choice school operators suddenly find the money pie shrinking as voters decide they're tired of paying for a system they've been cut out of.

But the biggest damage will come to communities themselves, because choice and charter systems are based on business principles, not education or community principles. And the most basic business principle is to close up shop when you aren't making money.

There has been a lot of shock and surprise around the country as charter schools just close their doors. (Columbus, Ohio, [saw 17 charters close in just one year.](#)) People tend to assume that part of being a school means staying open in your community, and they keep being surprised to discover that a charter school is not a school but a business. Charter and choice systems don't just disenfranchise the public in saying how schools in the community should work; charter and choice systems also take away any choice about whether there are schools in the community or not.

A public school system cannot suddenly just close its doors, even just a few of its doors, without answering to the taxpaying and voting public. But when it comes to decisions about whether charters stay open or not, even the parents themselves are disenfranchised. A choice system in your community doesn't only mean that the public has lost the ability to decide what kind of schools they'll have today. A choice system also means they've lost control over how much longer they'll have any schools at all.

That's the trade. A few people get to have a choice about schools today, and in return, nobody gets a choice about what schools, if any, to have in the community tomorrow. And in some cities, school-choice advocates have solved some of these issues by taking all authority away from the elected school board, sacrificing democracy itself.

This post originally appeared on [Curmudgucation](#).