

September 2008

*School Choice in
America and Iowa:
Examining the
Roots and Policies
of Education
Reform*

POLICY

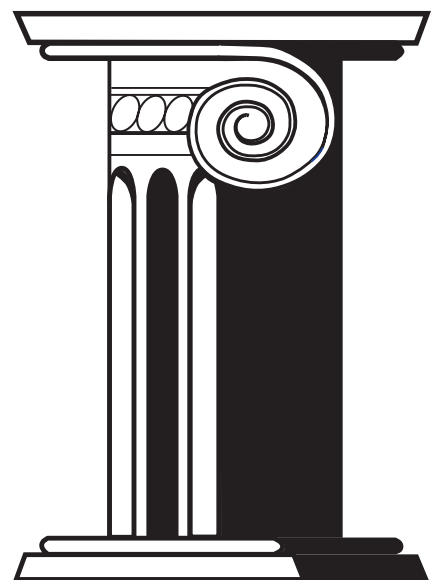
STUDY

No. 08-7

by

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PUBLIC INTEREST



I N S T I T U T E

POLICY STUDY

September 2008

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Public Interest Institute

**Dr. Don Racheter,
President**

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School Choice in America and Iowa: Examining the Roots and Policies of Education Reform

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Statistics abound that show American K-12 government-schooled students are falling behind in the basics: reading, writing, mathematics, and science. For example, according to the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment, U.S. 15-year-olds scored below average in science and math. Not only is there a “learning deficiency,” but fewer American students can compete on the “global job market,” particularly with their East Asian peers and students from other industrialized countries of the world.¹

Poor performance in high school generally leads to equally poor performance in college. Only 68 percent of ninth graders graduate high school on time. Of this number only approximately 40 percent enroll in college.² The American Legislative Exchange Council’s 2007 report found that 70 percent of public school eighth-graders performed below the standard proficiency level, and that of 25 states where students took the ACT exam only four—Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin—had average scores of 22 or better out of a possible 36.³

The introduction of school choice — defined as a policy that improves access to alternatives to the assigned government school⁴ — whether it is vouchers, tuition tax credits, or charter schools

has shown dramatic increase in student performance and parental satisfaction. [Although charter schools are under the jurisdiction of the traditional government school, they do provide “an alternative to the assigned government school,” and therefore are a type of school choice.] In many New York City charter schools, for example, students in grades 3-8 scored far higher on state reading and math tests than comparable students in traditional government schools.⁵

The road to complete and uninhibited school choice will wind through ideological and political curves; however, school choice advocacy groups, sympathetic state politicians, favorable court rulings, and the challenging task of neutralizing anti-choice lobbying groups, such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers,⁶ will do much to promote and retain the power of school choice.

Can Democrats and Republicans work together on school choice? There does seem to be hope both nationally⁷ and in Iowa. Eric Goranson of Goranson Consulting, a strong advocate for school choice in Iowa, believes there is hope for more Democrats to jump on the proverbial bandwagon of school choice and join their Republican counterparts in promoting and defending the moral and legal right and

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“School choice is not simply an economic or political issue; it is an issue that has deep philosophical and historical roots.”

responsibility of all parents to choose the best education for their children.

Goranson notes that “It’s true that Democrats are increasingly coming alongside Republicans on the issue of parental choice... Democrats are realizing that, especially for the Catholic, African American, [and] Hispanic... supporting tax credits for school choice provides a significant net gain in public support... School choice offers new hope to a tired public [government] education system in desperate need of some competition.”⁸

School choice is not simply an economic or political issue; it is an issue that has deep philosophical and historical roots. It is an issue that pulls at the very strings of human desire, that parents must and should have the power to choose the educational system that is best for their children. Parents, not the government, have the natural right and authority to govern and guide their children’s learning process. Self-governance is the bedrock of American civic values; self-governance only works when there is freedom of choice. This power of choice must remain strong.

School choice nationally

“I don’t want to send another generation of American children to failing schools. I don’t want that future for my daughters. I don’t want that future for your sons. I don’t want that future for America.”

--Barack Obama, Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, Des Moines, Iowa, November 10, 2007

“I believe parents should be empowered with their school choice to send their children to the school that can best educate them, just as many members of Congress do with their own children. I find it beyond hypocritical that many of those who would refuse to allow public school parents to choose their child’s school would never agree to force their own children into a school that did not work or was unsafe. They make another choice. That is a right we should honor for all parents. It is fundamental and essential.”

--John McCain, “John McCain on Education,” www.education.com accessed August 19, 2008

“...educational excellence depends on choice. I’ve long argued that parents should have more choice in determining the schools that their children will attend. I’ve long argued that more choice would lead to better education. And so, I’ve advocated tuition tax credits and education vouchers.”

--President Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Students at Suitland High School in Suitland, Maryland," January 20, 1988.

Education is an important issue for the 2008 presidential election. More specifically, education *reform*, such as school choice, is a key focus of interest. Both Senators Obama and McCain, the presidential nominees for their respective parties, clearly believe that changes in education need to be made. The primary difference is how the two candidates seek to make that change.

Statistics abound that show American students are falling behind in the basics: reading, writing, mathematics, and science. According to the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment, U.S. 15-year-olds scored below average in science and math. This translates into not only a learning deficiency, but it means fewer American students can compete on the "global job market" with their peers from East Asia and many other industrialized countries of the world.⁹

A recent Heritage Foundation report provided performance scores from U.S. high schools, based on the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data. The results are not encouraging. For

instance, thirty-nine percent of American 12th graders scored "below basic" on the 2005 NAEP math exam; 47 percent of 12th graders cannot demonstrate "an adequate understanding of important events in American history;" and only 66 percent of 12th grade students scored "basic" or above on the 2006 NAEP civics exam.¹⁰

In addition, the American Legislative Exchange Council's 2007 report found many disturbing performance-based results:

- In 2007, nearly 70 percent of government school eighth-graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test performed below the standard proficiency level;
- Of 25 states where students took the ACT exam only four—Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin—had average scores of 22 or better (out of a possible 36);
- Average SAT scores for all high-school test-takers have declined an average 2.1 percent since 1972.¹¹

Research also shows that 1) government spending on education has increased and 2) that increased government funding for education does not equal improved student performance, including increasing high school graduation rates. First,

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"Both Senators Obama and McCain, the presidential nominees for their respective parties, clearly believe that changes in education need to be made."

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“It seems that on average the cities with higher average per student expenditure actually had a lower [author emphasis] average graduation rate.”

education is still a government service that is largely funded at the state (46.9 percent) and local (44.0 percent) levels, with national government spending coming in at around 9 percent.¹² National government spending equals about \$71 billion, with the U.S. Department of Education spending almost \$40 billion on K-12 programs.¹³ However, the trend for national government spending has exponentially increased, going from \$30 billion in 1985 to \$71 billion in 2007, or a 138 percent increase, which equals approximately \$971 per student in 2007 real dollars, a dramatic increase from \$343 per student in 1970.¹⁴

Second, what is the result or outcome of this spending? Low test scores, reduced test scores, or minimal increases in test scores over the last 40 years is one indicator of the poor performance of government-educated students. However, one of the most telling factors demonstrating that increased spending does not necessarily equate with improved student performance results is the U.S. high school graduation rate. For example, only 68 percent of ninth graders graduate high school on time. Of this number only 40 percent enroll in college.¹⁵ What is the rate of graduation in government schools in some of the nation's largest cities? Table 1 shows graduation rates and per pupil expenditures in America's 50 largest cities.

The results are telling. In fact, there may even be an inverse relationship: the top 23 cities (those with average per-student expenditure above \$10,000) have an average per-student expenditure rate of \$11,678 and an average graduation rate of 48.2 percent, while the bottom 27 cities (those under \$10,000 per student expenditure) have an average per-student expenditure rate of \$8596 and an average graduation rate of 59.8 percent. It seems that on average the cities with higher average per student expenditure actually had a *lower* [author emphasis] average graduation rate. Clearly, the higher the per-student expenditure does not equal proportionately higher graduation rates.

Additionally, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute published two separate reports that demonstrated a “learning gap” or “negative learning” occurred between the freshman and senior years. In the report titled *Failing Our Students, Failing America*, researchers found that college seniors failed a basic test on America's history, political thought, international relations, and market economy with the overall senior mean barely unchanged between 2005 (53.2%) and 2006 (54.2%). In both studies, the average senior score in all four areas was an ‘F.’¹⁶

Whereas with the infusion of some type or method of school choice — defined as a

Table 1: Relationship between Per-Student Expenditures and Graduation Rate				
City	City Population	Principal School District	Per-Student Expenditures (2005 Dollars)	High School Graduation Rate in 2003-2004
1. Boston, MA	590,763	Boston	\$16,879	57.0
2. New York, NY	8,214,426	New York City	15,455	45.2
3. Washington, DC	581,530	District of Columbia	15,411	58.2
4. Indianapolis, IN	785,597	Indianapolis	14,428	30.5
5. Minneapolis, MN	372,833	Minneapolis	14,355	43.7
6. Atlanta, GA	486,411	Atlanta City	14,011	46.0
7. Detroit, MI	871,121	Detroit City	13,529	24.9
8. Portland, OR	537,081	Portland	13,522	53.6
9. Philadelphia, PA	1,448,394	Philadelphia City	13,498	49.6
10. Milwaukee, WI	573,358	Milwaukee	12,789	46.1
11. Cleveland, OH	444,313	Cleveland Municipal City	12,157	34.1
12. Los Angeles, CA	3,849,378	Los Angeles Unified	11,647	45.3
13. Dallas, TX	1,232,940	Dallas Intermediate	11,604	44.4
14. San Jose, CA	929,936	San Jose Unified	11,473	77.0
15. Seattle, WA	582,454	Seattle	11,455	67.6
16. Denver, CO	566,974	Denver County	10,905	46.3
17. San Diego, CA	1,256,951	San Diego Unified	10,850	61.6
18. Sacramento, CA	453,781	Sacramento City Unified	10,783	66.7
19. Oakland, CA	397,067	Oakland Unified	10,756	45.6
20. Baltimore, MD	631,366	Baltimore City	10,707	34.6
21. San Antonio, TX	1,296,682	San Antonio Intermediate	10,460	51.9
22. Austin, TX	709,893	Austin Intermediate	10,400	58.2
23. Chicago, IL	2,833,321	City of Chicago	10,181	51.5
24. San Francisco, CA	744,041	San Francisco Unified	9,844	73.1
25. Columbus, OH	733,023	Columbus	9,762	40.9
26. Phoenix, AZ	1,512,986	Phoenix Union	9,578	58.3
27. Honolulu, HI	377,357	Hawaii	9,429	64.1
28. Virginia Beach, VA	435,619	Virginia Beach City	9,396	67.4
29. Fresno, CA	466,714	Fresno Unified	9,330	57.4
30. Miami, FL	404,048	Dade County	9,322	49.0
31. Nashville-Davidson Co., TN	522,120	Nashville-Davidson Co.	9,160	77.0
32. Louisville-Jefferson Co., KY	554,496	Jefferson County	9,069	63.7
33. Colorado Springs, CO	372,437	Colorado Springs	9,011	76.0
34. Charlotte, NC	630,478	Charlotte-Mecklenburg	8,911	59.8
35. Houston, TX	2,144,491	Houston Intermediate	8,849	54.6
36. Omaha, NE	419,545	Omaha	8,828	55.1
37. Las Vegas, NV	552,539	Clark County	8,817	53.1
38. Long Beach, CA	472,494	Long Beach Unified	8,561	63.5
39. Wichita Falls, KS	357,698	Wichita	8,554	59.6
40. Kansas City, MO	447,306	Kansas City	8,402	45.7
41. El Paso, TX	609,415	El Paso Intermediate	8,374	60.5
42. Albuquerque, NM	504,949	Albuquerque	8,242	60.8
43. Tulsa, OK	382,872	Tulsa	8,223	50.6
44. Memphis, TN	670,902	Memphis City	8,055	61.7
45. Tucson, AZ	518,956	Tucson Unified	7,941	71.7
46. Fort Worth, TX	653,320	Fort Worth Intermediate	7,863	55.5
47. Jacksonville, FL	794,555	Duval County	7,793	50.2
48. Arlington, TX	367,197	Arlington Intermediate	7,304	62.7
49. Oklahoma City, OK	537,734	Oklahoma City	6,860	47.5
50. Mesa, AZ	447,541	Mesa Unified	6,558	77.1

Table taken from Dan Lips, Shanea J. Watkins, and John Fleming, "Does Spending More on Education Improve Academic Achievement?" *Backgrounders*; The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 2008. p. 7. Sources that authors used: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, District Information, <<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch>> (August 19, 2008) and Christopher B. Swanson, "Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation," Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, April 1, 2008, <www.edweek.org/media/citiesincrisis041008.pdf> (August 19, 2008).

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“This capacity and need for freedom is the primary reason why we must examine the philosophical and constitutional foundations and principles for enacting free-market incentives, and limiting the reach of civil government when it comes to parents choosing which educational venue is best for their child.”

policy that improves access to alternatives to the assigned government school¹⁷—such as the use of vouchers, charter schools, or tuition tax credits, student performance and parental satisfaction, for example, increase dramatically.

- New York City charter school students in grades 3-8 scored far higher on state reading and math tests than comparable students in traditional government schools.
- In addition, every year a student remains in a charter school, they make up 12 percent of the distance from failing to being proficient in math and nearly 4 percent from failing to proficient in reading.¹⁸
- Charter schools tend to do better for elementary-aged students and students who remain in charter schools rather than moving back and forth between traditional government schools and charter schools also do better statistically.¹⁹

The impact of school choice options, such as charter schools, is generally positive, and the demand for more choice options by parents, students, and community leaders is readily apparent. Before we examine the politics of school choice, let’s take a look at the philosophical and historical foundations of school choice.

Philosophical foundation for school choice

Freedom of choice is not simply a libertarian argument, based solely upon an economic analysis of the power of free markets. Choice is not a human design or man-made goal; it is not a contrived approach to explaining why parents should have the ability to move their child from one government school district to another, or to a private or home schooling venue. Likewise, it is not simply an argument for limiting the reach of a centralized government hierarchy, whether at the national or state level, just for the sake of limiting government. It is instead a moral virtue. It is the human capacity and need for freedom. And this capacity and need for freedom is the primary reason why we must examine the philosophical and constitutional foundations and principles for enacting free-market incentives, and limiting the reach of civil government when it comes to parents choosing which educational venue is best for their child.

Heritage Foundation fellow Andrew E. Busch asserts that constitutional principles, for example, are necessary components for debating and defending conservative policy positions, whether framed in terms of free-markets, limited-government, or traditional values arguments. He notes that “development of an intellectual

framework” is critical for policymakers to make sound policy decisions. Policymakers “need first to understand and then to expound upon the links between seemingly mundane policy questions and broad constitutional principles.”²⁰

Other historians argue that education is the primary means for parents to inculcate their children with sound principles of history, philosophy, and world view ideas and concepts that are classical and traditional in nature, and have framed human learning for centuries. Education is a conduit for wisdom and truth; it is the means by which parents hold the responsibility of instilling in their child not only the “ability” to learn (i.e. development of learning tools), but the “love” of learning. According to historian Alan Snyder, education is designed to: 1) enlighten the human understanding; 2) correct a child’s temper; 3) form manners and habits; and 4) fit a person for usefulness.²¹ The family is the primary institution designed to fulfill these objectives. Government was not designed to carry out these goals. The Founding Fathers understood the true basis and foundation of education and learning, whether they were taught at home by parents or private tutor or in a formal school setting.

Like the Founders in the 18th century, some educational theologians make a compelling

argument that parents still have “the *moral* right, the *human* right — the right that, whether or not honored by our legal code, *should be* honored by it and even...*ensured* by it, for a good legal code...honors the human, moral rights of the citizens, ensures [guarantees] some of them, and does so in a fair, equitable and just manner.” Because parents have this social responsibility and moral right to oversee the education and learning of their children, then “our legal code should then honor that right. It should not violate it — unless absolutely necessary.”²²

According to this position, government has no place in “determining the character of a child’s education.” Nicholas Wolterstorff further writes, “In fact, not only does the state have no right to determine the character of a child’s education, but has no rights whatsoever that our legal code should respect with regard to how our children are educated.”²³ The modern rise of home schooling and even the resurrection of the classical learning paradigm — *grammar, logic, and rhetoric* or the trivium — have a strong foundation in freedom of choice; choice that promotes not only the right but responsibility of parents to choose education for their child, but what type of pedagogy and instructional format should be used.²⁴

The following section examines the historical foundation for

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“The modern rise of home schooling and even the resurrection of the classical learning paradigm — grammar, logic, and rhetoric or the trivium — have a strong foundation in freedom of choice; choice that promotes not only the right but responsibility of parents to choose education for their child, but what type of pedagogy and instructional format should be used.”

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“Educational choice was highlighted by Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations in 1776.”

school choice and especially the role that parents should and must have in the ability to declare the type and style of education that is proper for their child.

Historical foundation for school choice

School choice and market principles are not recent phenomena. Andrew Coulson evaluated the “monetary incentives and centralized administration” of education over the last two and a half millennia and concludes that parental and school choice is aligned with enhanced performance, better skills, and the relationship between school governance structures and quality.²⁵ In fact, Coulson contends that history shows that government education as opposed to private instruction “did not work well even for elites.” However, free-market education — that is education that is financed and implemented by sources other than solely the central or state government apparatus — such as demonstrated in ancient Athens and even as late as 18th and 19th century Britain, far exceeded government education in terms of entrepreneurialism, creativity, and production.²⁶

Educational choice was highlighted by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776:

The expense of the institutions for education

and religions (*ous*) [my emphasis for clarification] instruction, is likewise, no doubt, beneficial to the whole society, and may, therefore, without injustice, be defrayed by the general contribution of the whole society. This expense, however, might perhaps with equal propriety, and even with some advantage, be defrayed altogether by those who receive the immediate benefit of such education and instruction, or by the voluntary contribution of those who think they have occasion for either the one or the other.²⁷

Founding Father Benjamin Rush wrote that “Our schools of learning... will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government.”²⁸ Rush, like many of his contemporaries, also noted that for this mode of education to be “secure to the state” it should be founded upon religious instruction, something that today is anathema to government educational practice and choice.²⁹ Clearly, the basis for sound learning and education was founded not only on a historical basis of choice, i.e. Coulson’s point, but upon a pre-determined, culturally-biased, and religiously-grounded understanding of what formal education should be.³⁰

The formation of common schools, dating as far back as the early 17th century English colonists, where the first compulsory education laws of Massachusetts originated, held a special place in the heart of the residents of rural local communities. School buildings, built and supported by the parents and townsfolk as a whole, were an integral part of the growing social, political, and economic needs of the community. They were, so to speak, the heart and soul of the community.³¹

By 1787 the Northwest Ordinance required that each town established in the Northwest Territory would “set aside a mile square section of land for educational purposes,” and affirmed that “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education should forever be encouraged.”³² The role of education was clearly to not only educate the student in the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics, but, for instance, the Founders believed education and religious instruction, which came from both the home and schoolhouse, were necessary for the development of a civic-minded and well-informed citizenry.

What type of education did the Founders receive? The Founders were largely trained

in classical and religious education, whether at home by a mother or private tutor, or in a formal academy, usually led by a well-educated and trained minister. These two pillars of learning anchored them in spiritual and ancient truths of wisdom and virtue. Many of the Founders began their formal educational training at approximately age eight. Their daily regimen included Latin and Greek grammar, science, moral philosophy, mathematics, and Bible reading and translation from the original languages.

Thomas Jefferson studied Latin and Greek from a Scottish clergyman named William Douglas and later with James Maury, who operated a classical academy. Before Alexander Hamilton was accepted into King’s College, which is now Columbia University, he was expected to have mastery of Latin and Greek grammars, read in the original Latin from Cicero, and demonstrate he could translate the first ten chapters of John from Greek into Latin. And before entering the College of New Jersey, which is now Princeton, James Madison was expected to read and write in Latin.³³ Clearly, the training received during the founding era emphasized both wisdom and virtue.

Whereas Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia for the development and civil nurturing of citizen

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“The Founders were largely trained in classical and religious education, whether at home by a mother or private tutor, or in a formal academy, usually led by a well-educated and trained minister.”

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“They firmly believed that education was the duty and right of the parents, and that the state government did not have jurisdiction.”

leaders — the Jacksonian democrats fostered a decentralized and “common man” approach to education. The Jacksonians believed that Jefferson and the other Founders saw education as simply a tool for the wealthy and elite in society. However, the Jacksonians intended to decentralize the educational system, including schools of higher education. Ultimately, the Jacksonians were as some indicate the progenitors of government education, where schooling and education acted “as an equalizer rather than a selector... where school had the task of eliminating all privilege and destroying all elites by giving to all men the same good common education.”³⁴ Education and learning would never be same again.

Prior to the Civil War and through the Reconstruction era, major changes in education were becoming readily apparent, including discussion and passage, of compulsory state attendance laws, erection of state boards or commissions of education, and more rigid means of pedagogy, such as the separation of children by age, not skill level. Nonetheless, most Americans in pre-Civil War America did not embrace many of these changes, even compulsory education. They firmly believed that education was the duty and right of the parents, and that the state government did not have jurisdiction.³⁵ In fact,

only Massachusetts passed a compulsory education law prior to the Civil War.

However, by the Gilded Age, and continuing into the Progressive Era, government schools became the norm. New York City passed compulsory attendance laws in 1874, and by the 1880s school enrollment exploded. Rural areas lost population to the burgeoning cities; family farms gave way to industrialization, and the community school, with its one-room school house, local community control, and attention to student needs, capitulated to professional education, including centralization of administration, curriculum, and culture.³⁶ Thus, learning was effectively removed from the hands of the local community and parents, and transferred to the government and education professionals, who would use enhanced means and tools, derived from psychology, sociology, and education research, to enhance and increase the learning of America’s children.³⁷

With the advent of the Progressive Era, which was bolstered by revolutionary European theories and practices, such as the use of scientific management principles, American government schools abandoned their rural community roots, philosophy, and methods, and replanted in the urban Mecca.³⁸

Routinization of curriculum, standards of behavior and deportment, centralization of control through state and local organizations, such as departments of education and local school boards and commissions, became the norm. The influence of government education reformers, from Horace Mann to John Dewey and beyond, and the political agendas of presidents, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who argued that education was a “political right” and thus it was the government’s responsibility to provide that right,³⁹ radicalized education and learning by de-emphasizing the roles of home and family, the free-market, and limited government principles, which were so evident earlier in our nation’s history,⁴⁰ and replaced them with centralized governmental control over education and the learning process. This thinking and practice is apparent even today, such as with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

The modern era begins

It was Milton Friedman, the libertarian economist, who in 1955 announced the economic benefits of choice, through the introduction of “school vouchers”⁴¹ and initiated what is today commonly referred to as school choice. Friedman developed the theme of human liberty within the context of free-market economic

principles to argue for a reduced role of government in the education and instruction of students. He supported a system that incorporates a “free private enterprise exchange economy,” where government’s primary role is not to dictate curriculum and set social and health regulations that are supposedly related to the benefit of the student, but “to preserve the rules of the game by enforcing contracts, preventing coercion, and keeping markets free.”⁴²

For Friedman, government intervention in the educational system should be limited to only three situations: 1) where there is a “natural monopoly” that makes effective competition unworkable; 2) where there are significant costs related to privatizing the educational process; and 3) where there is little to no “paternalistic concern” for children. Interestingly enough — although not unexpected — Friedman contends that the third scenario is unnecessary and avoidable when the government recognizes “...the family as the basic unit and therefore parents as responsible for their children,”⁴³ including educating them.

Friedman believed that government played a minimal role in education — requiring a certain level of education and financing education — and this role is justified by what he terms the “neighborhood

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“It was Milton Friedman, the libertarian economist, who in 1955 announced the economic benefits of choice, through the introduction of ‘school vouchers’ and initiated what is today commonly referred to as school choice.”

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“Friedman is recognized as the guru of instigating the modern day voucher wars, because he proclaimed that 1) parents should have control over the child’s education, and 2) that the free-market should be an integral mechanism in determining how, where, and why the parent should be able to exercise choice.”

effects of schooling,” where the local community benefits. However, as Friedman notes the two parts could be separated through the imposition of vouchers “redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year” when the vouchers are spent on educational services accepted by the government, including for-profit and non-profit educational organizations.⁴⁴ Friedman is recognized as the guru of instigating the modern day voucher wars, because he proclaimed that 1) parents should have control over the child’s education, and 2) that the free-market should be an integral mechanism in determining how, where, and why the parent should be able to exercise choice.⁴⁵

This “denationalizing” effect⁴⁶ would result in more choices for parents, whether it was a government school in another district, a parochial or secular private school, or home schooling. In effect, Friedman’s economic freedom thesis might also be labeled “voting with your feet;” where in this case the act of “voting” is having the financial ability to move your child from an underachieving school to one that better suits the needs of the parent [or customer],⁴⁷ thus connecting the “delivery of education services” and the role of market structure with that of school financing.⁴⁸ Clearly these two strands of economic thought and practice

are relevant to the discussion of school choice.

It was then, largely, that school choice, first displayed as school vouchers, became a serious policy issue. It was not; however, until the Milwaukee voucher experience in 1990 that serious study of the process began.⁴⁹ Early experiments with vouchers (i.e. Alum Rock, CA in the early 1980s) were limited in scope and potential. It was not until President Reagan publicized his support and enthusiasm for school choice generally and vouchers and tuition tax credits specifically⁵⁰ that any significant legislation resulted.⁵¹ Despite the critics, the political and policy pioneers of the 1980s continued to lay the groundwork and push for true external reform of government education.⁵²

The 1990s saw a flurry of voucher legislation. Most of it died in Congress, unsupported by a recalcitrant Senate and an unwilling President Clinton, and several state referendums that touted vouchers, including Oregon (1990), Colorado (1992), California (1993), and Washington (1996), were defeated.⁵³ But with the Republican seizure of the House of Representatives in 1994, the election of Republican George W. Bush in 2000 and again in 2004, and the *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (536 U.S. 639 2002) Supreme Court case, which ruled the use of vouchers to be constitutional,

even if the student chooses to attend a parochial school, school choice in all of its various forms took center stage.

The push is on for more choice

Today, state and local interest in school choice is rampant, continuing to seize attention in both the popular⁵⁴ and academic literature.⁵⁵ State legislative leaders on both sides of the aisle⁵⁶ are pushing for some type of school choice, whether it is vouchers, charter schools, or, more recently, tax credits for both individual tuition expenses and individual and corporate contributions to scholarship organizations. Organizations of all types and at all levels — think tanks to education policy groups — are at the forefront of school choice research and advocacy.⁵⁷

Despite the empirical findings that demonstrate choice works,⁵⁸ competition is good for the education market,⁵⁹ and that more and more parents and students accept choice as a viable and realistic option,⁶⁰ opposition continues; first, from the academic community;⁶¹ second, from the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers,⁶² and third from the state educational bureaucracy establishment, including state departments of education. Two of the key arguments against school choice are 1) that it interferes with the dissemination of professional

educational service delivery goals and methods, and 2) that choice encourages the migration of students to private and/or home school environments, which draws away much needed financial resources. (Still, despite the fact that choice leads to more competition and enhanced performance, the vast majority of K-12 students in the U.S. still attend government versus private schools.)⁶³

Opponents to school choice do not always oppose school reform for government education; it is just that the reform measures they seek are internal, organizational, institutional, and financial—that is they are initiated within the accepted political, bureaucratic, and budgetary frameworks. They include such factors as greater government spending, tougher requirements, more testing, and stronger state certification regulations,⁶⁴ and not external, such as through teacher empowerment and parental choice.⁶⁵

On the other hand, school choice advocates and scholars, such as John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe,⁶⁶ contend that internal and institutional reforms simply do not address the critical issues and problems that face government schools: poor performance, low standards, poorly trained and motivated teachers, failing to compete in the global economy, and a host of others. The

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School Choice in America and Iowa

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authors argue that these typical institutional reforms only bring about more bureaucratic controls and highlight fewer freedoms, whereas innovative reforms such as school-based management, teacher professionalism and empowerment, and, of course, parental choice have the power and flexibility to meet these problems. Others, such as Paul E. Peterson, who sponsored Chubb and Moe’s 1990 work, concluded, after thoroughly re-examining John Witte’s Milwaukee data, that the value of vouchers was significant, even noting that “students in private schools (the beneficiaries of vouchers) were learning more than those remaining in [government] schools.”⁶⁷

The Supreme Court and school choice

In the landmark U.S. Supreme Court school choice case, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (268 U.S. 510 1925), the Court ruled mandatory attendance in the district where the student resides is an “unreasonable interference with the liberty of the parents...”⁶⁸ Further, the Court went on to say that a “child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.”⁶⁹ The Court ruled that it was the right and responsibility of the student’s

parents to be in control of and responsible for their child’s educational experience. By 2002 and the Supreme Court’s decision favoring the constitutionality of vouchers in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (536 U.S. 639 2002), the country’s “school choice conscience” was being re-framed.

Conventional government school thinking was in large part traditional and ideological: traditional, because this is the way it has always been, and ideological, because of the belief of some that it is the state’s responsibility to care for and educate the nation’s children.⁷⁰ Although public opinion is still in favor of retaining government education and satisfied to a certain extent with the system itself, although not necessarily with the outcomes, i.e. performance; that same public is also very much in favor of promoting and implementing various types of school choice measures.⁷¹ School choice options, from charter schools to vouchers to tax credits, and their proponents, have increased in political clout and policy legitimacy, and they show no signs of retreating.

The following section briefly defines, describes, and illustrates Iowa’s experience with school choice, focusing exclusively on tuition tax credits for both individual expenses and for contributions to scholarship organizations

and charter school development. We conclude with a summary of school choice politics.

Iowa and school choice options

School choice is not easily defined. Choice highlights economics, markets, and competition, while reform signifies a less radical departure from the established educational institutional framework and setting, with emphasis on greater teacher funding, more testing, and greater bureaucratic regulation and/or accreditation standards.⁷² Clearly, though, the focus of this article is directed toward school choice, particularly the types of choice that embody free-market and limited-government principles.

Profile of Iowa government education

The Iowa Department of Education (DOE), which was originally created in 1913 to work with small, isolated school districts and buildings, has now grown into a centralized and formal system of government education, defining and regulating duties and setting teacher qualifications, among its many powers. Even though local school districts are governed in some manner by state and national laws, which largely set broad parameters regarding

course requirements and teacher qualifications, each Iowa school district is generally free to set specific policy, define academic requirements, and establish a budget.⁷³

The K-12 government school system in Iowa is organized according to local school districts (362), is comprised of over 1,500 individual schools housing over 480,000 government-school students, has a student to teacher ratio of 13 to 1, boasts over 35,000 accredited teachers, and spends nearly \$8,500 per student.⁷⁴

Iowa consistently ranks near the top in a range of statistical categories, from average ACT and SAT scores, NAEP results compared to the national average, teacher certification regulations, teacher pay, provision of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and high AP test scores compared to private school students. The state will institute a state-defined Core Curriculum for both private and accredited non-public schools beginning 2008, with full implementation set for 2010.⁷⁵

Examples of Iowa government-school student performance follow.

- Fourth graders rank 9th in the nation in reading based on the NAEP tests.
- Iowa ranks 10th in the nation for having the highest proportion of 4th graders

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School Choice in America and Iowa

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- scoring at the highest two levels in math in the NAEP tests.
- ACT college entrance exams are in the top two out of 25 participating states.
- Iowa government school students have the 5th highest average AP scores in the nation.
- Iowa is one of the top nine states nationally in proportion of students taking advanced math courses such as trigonometry and pre-calculus.
- Iowa ranks 12th in the nation in the proportion of teachers who received certification from the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.
- Iowa is ranked in the top five states in proportion of 7th-12th grade science teachers with majors in their respective fields of interest.
- Graduation rate was over 90 percent for the 2004-2005 school year.
- Iowa is first in the nation in percentage of primary schools with a gifted and talented program.⁷⁶

Despite the high marks noted above, Iowa falls short in several areas:

- Twenty-two percent of Iowa student test-takers only took the minimum core courses: Algebra I, II, and Geometry. Of that group, only 25 percent are considered

“college ready.”

- There is a large achievement gap between racial and ethnic student groups in Iowa, The average ACT for Asian-Americans is 22.7, for whites is 22.5, for Hispanics is 20.1, for American Indians is 20.9, and for African-Americans it is 17.8.⁷⁷
- According to a panel of Iowa business leaders, Iowa government high school students do not have the skill sets necessary to compete at the highest level in the global economic market.⁷⁸

In 1987, the Iowa General Assembly passed the Postsecondary Enrollment Options Act, which permitted juniors and seniors to take nonsectarian college courses. In the same year, the Legislature permitted parents who had median household incomes under \$45,000 to deduct up to \$1,000 per child for all expenses related to education purposes. By 1998 then Governor Terry E. Branstad signed HF 2513, which set the tax credit at 25 percent for the first \$1,000 and included a revision that allowed “materials for extracurricular activities” to also be included. Further legislative action in subsequent years was taken to increase the tuition tax credit to 50 percent, but it failed to gain the requisite votes necessary for passage.⁷⁹

Iowa also has an open-enrollment or dual-enrollment law that provides private-schooled and home-schooled students opportunity to participate in classes and extracurricular activities at state expense. The Open Enrollment Act (Iowa Code 282.18) was made law in 1990. The law states in part, “It is the goal of the general assembly to permit a wide range of education choices for children enrolled in schools in this state and to maximize ability to use those... [To] maximize parental choices and access to educational opportunities that are not available to children because of where they live.” As of 2006-2007, more than 24,000 students were dual-or open-enrolled in Iowa government schools and programs. This is a 25 percent increase from 2001-2002.⁸⁰

With such relatively high marks in student performance, at least when compared nationally, why should Iowa even pursue school choice options? A brief overview of Iowa’s history with school choice, and a description of two types of school choice, including charter schools and tuition tax credits, will help provide some insight for responding to this question.

Iowa’s charter schools

In 2003, former Governor Tom Vilsack signed Iowa’s charter school legislation (SF 348) into law. The legislation

provided for up to 10 charter schools, contingent upon the state receiving federal start-up money. During the 2006 legislative session the cap was raised to 20, but state funding was not included. To date all funding for charter schools and their operation is limited to national government funding.⁸¹

Iowa charter school start-ups:

- 2004-2005: two schools achieved charter status;
- 2005-2006: five schools achieved charter status;
- 2006-2007: three schools achieved charter status;
- 2007-2008: one school discontinued its charter, leaving nine charter schools in the state.⁸²

The success factor of charter schools in Iowa is measured in a two-pronged fashion. First, they are guided by five basic goals set forth by the Iowa Department of Education. These goals are:

- One, establish charter schools that represent a diversity of programs;
- Two, provide technical assistance throughout the charter schools developmental and implementation phases;
- Three, collect and analyze quantitative outcome data against the original goals;
- Four, document the best practices of select charter schools;
- And five, increase the

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School Choice in America and Iowa

“What makes a charter school effective? Performance, accountability, and other similar items are certainly important to the continued existence of most charter schools, but one of the key variables — if not the most important — is the degree of difficulty for charter schools to begin.”

number and presence of charter schools in Iowa.

Second, charter schools monitor themselves, setting individual goals, including both academic and non-academic. For example, all of Iowa’s charter high schools have set a goal that is aimed at increasing the number of community college credits that juniors and seniors can earn while still in high school.⁸³ Elementary and middle-school charters, on the other hand, are more varied, depending in large part upon their basic goal and mission. For example, some elementary charter schools included in their mission statement a challenge for greater diversity of learning opportunities, such as “multicultural experiences, technology integration, and expeditionary learning.” None of these are easily measured through empirical analysis; however, it does indicate that “innovative methods of teaching” are being employed.⁸⁴

A 2007 evaluation of charter school progress in Iowa is titled “Charter Schools in Iowa: Progress Update.” Compiled and published by the Iowa Department of Education, it describes each of the nine charter schools in operation at the time of publication, including stating the school’s mission, description of the charter, identification of primary goals, specific measures used to quantify the goals, and descriptive data to

highlight progress made to date. (See Table 2 for summary of the report’s details concerning Iowa’s nine charter schools.)

Iowa charter schools range from a “K-5 arts integration model, [designed] to accelerate student achievement and develop the whole child” to a 7-12 school district, working in conjunction with a local community college, to develop student interest in pursuing business careers. Each of the nine has developed program goals and measures and assessments aimed at producing “results of implementation.”

In some cases (e.g., Prescott Elementary Charter School located in Dubuque) have detailed results based on “literacy assessment tests” and other testing devices; whereas others, such as Panorama Charter School located in Panora, have “no results available.”⁸⁵ Therefore, given the paucity of empirical information provided in the report, little policy analysis can be provided.

What makes a charter school effective? Performance, accountability, and other similar items are certainly important to the continued existence of most charter schools, but one of the key variables — if not the most important — is the degree of difficulty for charter schools to begin. The Center for Education Reform (CER) has conducted much research in this area.

Table 2: Summary of descriptive information on Iowa charter schools					
Charter	Mission	Description	Goals	Measures	Progress
Northeast Iowa Charter High School, West Central Community School District, P. O. Box 54, Maynard, IA, 50655-0054, (563) 637-2283; Jim Patera, Superintendent	“To produce a literate, lifelong learner who is visionary and productive, aware of self, accepting of cultural differences, sensitive to others, and who applies knowledge to make morally responsible decisions in an ever-changing global society.”	“Partnership between Northeast Iowa Community College and West Central High School...to provide unlimited learning opportunities producing a highly qualified work force...”	To increase graduates with dual concentrations. Increase number of candidates who complete training beyond high school. Increase ITED scores	Document number of graduates with dual concentrations. Track students’ rate of course completion. Establish baseline and then use survey to compare with baseline. Assess ITED scores.	Number of students with dual concentrations increased. Average number of college credits earned by Charter seniors increased. ITED scores increased in reading, math, and science.
Lincoln Academy of Integrated Arts, Davenport Community School District, 318 East 7 th Street, Davenport, IA, 52803; (563) 324-0497; Mary McMeekin, Principal	“In collaboration with parents, arts partners and the larger community, to engage the whole child through challenging academic, arts-infused learning in a safe and positive environment.”	“K-5 arts integration model to accelerate student achievement and develop the whole child...”	Increase reading proficiency of all students. Increase math proficiency of all students. Increase science proficiency of all students. Increase arts proficiency of all students.	ITBS Reading Comprehension ITBS Mathematics ITBS Science District Creative arts Performance Based Assessment	1. Percentage of 4 th grade students and 3-5 combined proficiency in reading increased; 2. Percentage of 4 th grade students and 3-5 combined proficiency in math decreased; 3. Percentage of 4 th grade students and 3-5 combined proficiency in science decreased. 4. No data to present on arts assessment.
Iowa Central Charter High School (11 th -12 th Grade), Southeast Webster Community School District, P.O. Box 49, 30850 Paragon Avenue, Burnside, IA, 50521-0683; Dr. Mike Jorgensen, Superintendent	“To develop a fast track program that will assist students in working towards an AA degree in a specific vocational area or towards a four-year degree program.”	Develop partnership with Iowa Central Community College for juniors and seniors who have specific vocational and academic needs.	Increase number of graduates. Increase math, science and reading ITED scores.	SE Webster Graduate Data; ICCHS Graduate Data ITED scores	1. Percentage of students earning college credit increased. 2. Between 2003-2004 and 2006-2007 the percentage of juniors scoring in proficient range of ITED in reading decreased. 3. Average composite score for students taking ACT during 2005-2006 year increased.

<p>Elma Elementary Charter School, Howard-Winneshiek Community School District, P.O. Box 56, 120 West Jackson, Elma, IA, 52155; Robert Hughes, Principal</p>	<p>“To provide standard-based multiage instruction that ensures each child innovative learning experiences, multicultural awareness, and the use of technological tools to develop responsible citizens, while embracing parents, families, and community.”</p>	<p>“Provide standard-based multiage instruction K-5 that ensures innovative learning, multicultural awareness, use of technology, and community and family development...”</p>			
<p>Storm Lake/Iowa Central/Buena Vista Early College Charter High School, Storm Lake Community School District, P.O. Box 638, Storm Lake, IA, 50588-0638; Paul Tedesco, Superintendent</p>	<p>“To make higher education more accessible, affordable, especially those who did not see a college degree in their future due to language and/or economic barriers, and, thereby help to increase Storm Lake’s high school graduation and successful college completion rates for all of its graduates and especially a portion of its most disadvantaged youth.”</p>	<p>A 9-12 expanded dual-credit educational program in collaboration with local colleges and universities.</p>	<p>Increase number of high school students to attend college.</p> <p>Provide a more rigorous college career-prep curriculum and increase course offerings.</p> <p>Raise ITED scores in reading, math, and science.</p>	<p>Enrollment data</p> <p>Course evaluations</p> <p>ITED scores, Compass assessment, and ASSET</p>	<p>Measure the total number of college credits earned by Charter Students.</p> <p>Using performance scores from ITED exams</p> <p>Introduction of additional dual-credit courses.</p>
<p>Northwest Iowa Charter High School, Hartley-Melvin-Sanborn Community School District, 173 South Central Avenue, Hartley, IA, (712) 928-3406; Mark Petersen, Administrator</p>	<p>“To develop career academies and pathways beyond what could possibly be available within the Hartley-Melvin-Sanborn High School, to provide students a fast track to a college education, and to focus on students with special needs or who are considered at risk.”</p>	<p>Increase course rigor for juniors and seniors, especially through dual-credit courses.</p>	<p>Increase student participation in college credit courses</p> <p>Each student will have HS and college level courses</p> <p>Improve student achievement in selected areas.</p>	<p>Participation numbers</p> <p>Locally developed assessment</p> <p>ITED, ACT</p>	<p>Sixty-eight students were enrolled in 160 college credit courses (2005-2006 school year)</p> <p>100 percent of students took college level courses</p> <p>High proficiency levels for juniors in math, science, and reading.</p>

<p>Prescott Elementary Charter School, Dubuque Community School District, 1151 White Street, Dubuque, IA, 52001, (563) 552-4200; Christine McCarron, Administrator</p>	<p>“To empower each child to achieve to his/her highest potential and to become a strong contributing member of the community.”</p>	<p>Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Iowa’s Positive Behavior Support Initiative, visual and performing arts-infused curriculum.</p>	<p>Increase student achievement in reading, math, social studies, and science</p> <p>Increase student and staff involvement in Expeditionary Learning Core Practices and Design Principles</p> <p>Increase student participation in visual and performing arts</p>	<p>Various early literacy assessment tests and the ITBS evaluation</p>	<p>Percent of students proficient in various areas mid-40s to upper 70s</p> <p>High parent-teacher collaboration</p> <p>Visual and performing arts students = 242</p> <p>Other measures of success also noted</p>
<p>Panorama Charter School, Panorama Community School District, 701 West Main, P.O. Box 39, Panora, IA, 50216, (641) 755-2317; Mark Johnson, Superintendent</p>	<p>“To provide a rigorous and relevant curriculum; ensure all students achieve competency of our core curriculum; students will become confident college level performers before graduating from high school; and strengthen relationships amongst our district’s families, school district and colleges to support college success of our students.”</p>	<p>To increase rigor and relevance</p> <p>Curriculum reviewed and core areas require C grade or higher</p> <p>Post-secondary opportunities are encouraged.</p> <p>Each student will have an individual learning plan.</p>	<p>Increase parent and school collaboration</p> <p>Increase percentage of students who can perform tasks at high level</p> <p>Increase number of students who can obtain college-standing</p>	<p>JMC data, ITB/ITED exams, sign-in-sheets, report card data, district standards and benchmarks, post-secondary graduate survey, and ACT feedback</p>	<p>Implementation delayed to 2007-2008.</p> <p>No results available.</p>
<p>e Sigourney Entrepreneurial Academy for Leadership (eSEAL), Sigourney Community School district, 107, W. Marion, Sigourney, IA, 51591, (641) 622-2025; Jason Munn, Administrator</p>	<p>“The e Sigourney Entrepreneurial Academy for Leadership (eSEAL) is being formed with the unique focus to broaden choice for all students in the Sigourney Community School District in grades 7-12...to realize opportunities to be entrepreneurs, to select post-secondary options, and to expand opportunities in career fields...”</p>	<p>eSEAL provides choice for students in 7-12 to develop entrepreneurial skills through application of classroom knowledge to actual experience of owning personal business. Strong relationship with Indian Hills Community College.</p>	<p>Achieve high levels in reading, math, and science.</p> <p>Increase hi-tech in classroom</p> <p>Increase class participation skills</p> <p>Help students develop business plan</p> <p>Students identify and evaluate market opportunities.</p>	<p>Various and distinct measures and assessment devices</p>	<p>Implementation will begin in 2007-2008. No results yet.</p>

Note: Descriptive data derived and summarized from Iowa Department of Education, “Charter Schools in Iowa: Progress Update: 2007,” December 2007. (After publication of the report, Buffalo Ridge failed to retain its charter and no longer exists.)

School Choice in America and Iowa

“Iowa’s charter school laws rank as the second weakest of the nation’s 41 charter laws. Only Mississippi’s is worse.”

The CER has compiled descriptive legal and regulatory information on the 50 states’ charter school laws.⁸⁶ One of the key variables that determines a state’s receptivity to charter schools is how easy or difficult states make it for charter schools to form and operate. Iowa’s charter school laws rank as the second weakest of the nation’s 41 charter laws. Only Mississippi’s is worse. Five main variables are examined by the Center for Education Reform: approval process, operations, funding, teachers, and students.⁸⁷ For comparison purposes, for example, let’s highlight Minnesota, which is ranked number one, and Iowa, which is ranked number forty-nine, to see some of the differences.

First, Minnesota allows the unlimited formation of charter schools, while Iowa restricts them to one per district, with a total of 20 allowed, and sunsets in 2010. Second, Minnesota’s approval process, particularly the eligible chartering authorities, is broad and diverse, including local school boards, colleges and universities, cooperatives, such as school districts working in conjunction with each other, and nonprofit organizations. Iowa, on the other hand, only allows the state board of education to be the chartering authority. The lack of diversity in chartering authorities naturally reduces the opportunities for pursuit of chartering

schools. Third, the operations of charter schools, such as legal autonomy, governance structure, management, and student assistance, are far more open and less restrictive in Minnesota as compared to Iowa. A fourth distinction between top charter school states, such as Minnesota, versus bottom charter school states, such as Iowa, centers on the autonomy of teachers. In Minnesota, teachers do not have to remain bound to their home district or covered by their collective bargaining agreement. The teachers may negotiate as a separate unit or even work independently. Not so in Iowa, where teachers are simply considered regular employees of the district, with little freedom or autonomy. Two key factors, then, that contribute to the success of charter schools is the number of chartering authorities that groups may use to obtain charters and the rules and restrictions in place to restrict the development of charter schools.⁸⁸

Tuition-tax-credit scholarships nationally

Tuition-tax-credit scholarships are rising in popularity. They are the strongest means of offering parents the opportunity to send their children to a private school of their choice. In 2007, for example, thirteen states and the District of Columbia provided some type of public support for private

education, including tuition tax credits and scholarship organizations.⁸⁹ Below are sketches of Arizona, Florida, and Pennsylvania's tuition-tax-credit scholarship programs.

Arizona: Arizona is not only a state leader in charter schools but, more recently, in providing tuition-tax-credit scholarships as well, especially for the corporate sector. In March 2006, Governor Janet Napolitano (D) allowed the bill to become law without her signature. It will sunset in 2011. The law allows corporations to receive 100 percent credit when they donate to Scholarship Tuition Organizations (STOs). There is a statewide cap of \$12 million in 2008, but each year will see a 20 percent increase.⁹⁰ According to the Goldwater Institute, average scholarships will equal on average \$3,000 and serve nearly 7,000 students.⁹¹

Florida: Florida is best known for its McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities (McKay). It is a voucher program, and it has been extremely successful, enabling students with physical and mental disabilities to attend a school of their choice; one that best serves their special needs.⁹² However, Florida also boasts a seven-year old tuition corporate-tax-credit scholarship program called "Step Up For Students." The Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs) provide scholarships

worth up to \$3,500 for low-income students. Currently, businesses and corporations receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits for contributions up to 75 percent of their total tax bill;⁹³ however, the Florida legislature is moving closer to increasing the \$88 million tax-credit cap another \$30 million. The expansion would aid an additional 5,000 children.⁹⁴ (In 2008 the Florida Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional McKay and SFOs.)

Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania reports that its Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program is working very well. The specifics are similar to most of the other tax credit programs discussed; however, it differs significantly in that the Pennsylvania legislature raised the total cap from \$30 million to \$75 million annually, including \$8 million that is to be allocated to pre-K programs. This means that nearly \$70 million is available under EITC, with nearly \$45 million going towards private scholarships and another \$22 million going towards what is deemed "innovative educational programming." During the 2006-2007 school year over 30,000 students benefited.⁹⁵

In addition to Arizona, Florida, and Pennsylvania, several other states have initiated tuition-tax-credit scholarship programs. Georgia, for instance, recently enacted the Georgia Private

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“In 2006, the Iowa Legislature passed legislation that provided a tax credit equal to 65 percent of a charitable contribution, whether cash or non-cash, made in the same tax year, subject to the total value of the organization’s tax credit certificates.”

School Tax Credit law, which allows private citizens and corporations to receive tax credits for donations to Student Scholarship Organizations (SSOs) that in turn will assist in paying tuition for eligible needy students.⁹⁶ Louisiana just adopted a tuition-tax-credit scholarship program. Low-income students living in inner city New Orleans are eligible. It is currently funded for up to \$10 million per year, and it is expected to assist nearly 1,000 children attend schools of their choice.⁹⁷ Rhode Island also adopted a tuition-tax-credit program similar to Pennsylvania’s, where “businesses can receive up to a 90 percent tax credit that equals \$100,000 annually on contributions.” The total cap is \$1 million.⁹⁸

These programs are popular largely because they provide both private citizens, businesses, and corporations the freedom to donate dollars to qualified funding organizations that in turn provide tuition-offsetting scholarships. Tuition-tax-credits are not vouchers. The donors use their own money and not government subsidized funds to educate children, which minimizes the role of state governments.⁹⁹

So, how does Iowa compare with other states’ tuition-tax-credit scholarship programs?

Iowa’s tuition-tax-credit scholarship program

In 2006, the Iowa Legislature passed legislation (i.e., Educational Opportunities Act, Iowa Code 422.11S, School Tuition Organization Tax Credit) that provided a tax credit equal to 65 percent of a charitable contribution, whether cash or non-cash, made in the same tax year, subject to the total value of the organization’s tax credit certificates.¹⁰⁰

The contributions would be designated to go to specified STOs, which must be registered with the IRS as 501 c(3) organizations. The maximum amount allowed in 2006 was \$2.5 million. It was raised to \$5 million in 2007 and increased once again to \$7.5 million in 2008. (A 2008 proposal would have raised the cap to \$10 million, but it failed because of budgetary constraints.)¹⁰¹ Table 3 depicts Iowa STOs, their physical location, student enrollment, and total tax credits allotted.

Only students from families with income equal to or less than 300 percent of federal poverty levels are eligible.¹⁰² In 2007, over 7,500 scholarships were distributed, with the average scholarship equal to \$528. The scholarship money can be used at anyone of nearly 160 accredited Iowa private schools.¹⁰³ Each STO is able to grant tax credits according to its individual share, which is determined by each school’s enrollment.¹⁰⁴

Table 3: School Tuition Organizations Approved November 2007 FOR 2008 Credit Allocation			
NAME	LOCATION	ENROLLMENT	TAX CREDITS (IN DOLLARS)
Our Faith, Our Children, Our Future STO	Dubuque	11,693	\$2,499,786
Catholic Tuition Organization, Diocese of Des Moines	Des Moines	6,006	\$1,283,992
Monsignor Lafferty Tuition Foundation	Sioux City	5,970	\$1,276,296
STO of Southeast Iowa	Clinton	2,461	\$526,124
Northwest Iowa Christian STO	Sioux Center	2,371	\$506,884
Heart of Iowa STO	Des Moines	1,862	\$398,067
Mississippi Valley STO	Davenport	1,737	\$371,344
Iowa Lutheran STO	Waterloo	1,459	\$311,912
Legacy of Grace STO	Pella	978	\$209,082
Iowa Independent STO	Fairfield	425	\$90,859
North Central Iowa STO	Fort Dodge	120	\$25,654
TOTALS	11 STOs in 10 cities	35,082	\$7,500,000

Note: Figures compiled by Jim McNulty, Iowa Department of Revenue, received in e-mail correspondence, August 7, 2008.

Iowa’s STOs are governed by a seven-member board of directors and must allocate a minimum of 90 percent of annual tax-credit donations to the scholarship fund. No STO can restrict their scholarship to one particular school, and donors cannot earmark their donations for a particular student.¹⁰⁵ In addition, STOs must provide annual reports, including names and addresses of all the STO’s board members, the total number and dollar value of the taxpayer contributions received, the total number and dollar value of tax credit certificates, and the total number and dollar value of scholarships granted, as well as a listing of the donors, the dollar value of their donations, and a listing of the recipient schools.¹⁰⁶ Most importantly, participating schools must report to Iowa’s Department of Revenue (DOR) by October 15 their total enrollment and the name of the STO that serves the school. DOR then uses these figures to determine the total

value of tax credit certificates each STO is authorized to grant, which as noted above, is based on school enrollment.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

School choice represents a diverse array of education policy relationships: national and state departments of education, local school boards and commissions, national and local branches of education unions such as the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, government school administrators, parents, students, home-schooling associations, legal advocacy organizations, ideologically-diverse policy advocacy groups, researchers, academics, and a host of others. According to political scientist Hugh Heclo, these relationships are best defined as an issue network. These various participants play an active role in the development of viable

“No STO can restrict their scholarship to one particular school, and donors cannot earmark their donations for a particular student.”

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“School choice offers new hope to a tired public education system in desperate need of some competition.”

policy decisions regarding school choice. In addition, the participants do not always have a financial interest in mind; rather, it is simply “their ideas and beliefs about proper public policy” that forms the basis for their participation.¹⁰⁸

Given this rather complex labyrinth of school choice participants and their equally diverse policy, political, and research agendas, the road to complete and uninhibited embrace of school choice will never be fully achieved, given the role of partisan politics, ideological fighting, and conflicting research results over the advantages and disadvantages of school choice measures. However, the role of school choice advocacy groups, sympathetic state politicians, future favorable court rulings, and the difficult task of neutralizing anti-choice lobbying groups like the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, will go a long way toward promoting and retaining the power of choice.

There is some hope, at least in Iowa, that Democrats and Republicans can and do work together to further school choice. Eric Goranson of Goranson Consulting, who is a strong advocate for school choice in Iowa, believes there is hope for more Democrats to support school choice and join their Republican counterparts in promoting and defending

the moral and legal right and responsibility of all parents to choose the best education for their children.

Goranson notes:

It’s true that Democrats are increasingly coming alongside Republicans on the issue of parental choice... [For example] Iowa’s Educational Opportunities act was implemented because Senator Gronstal [Democrat and state Senate Majority Leader] worked with his caucus...to push it through.

Further, Goranson comments:

...Democrats are realizing that, especially for the Catholic, African American, Hispanic, and education reform vote in general, supporting tax-credits for school choice provides a significant net gain in public support.

He concludes:

So, yes, I think as the school choice movement continues to court both Democrats and Republicans... Democrats will continue to be pleased to work with a group that is gaining momentum... School choice offers new hope to a tired public education system in desperate need of some competition.¹⁰⁹

School choice is not simply an economic or political issue; it is an issue that has deep philosophical and historical foundations. It is an issue that pulls at the very strings of human desire, which is that parents have the power to choose the educational system that is best suited for their child. Parents, not the government, have the natural right and authority to govern and guide their child's learning process. Self-governance is the bedrock of American civic values; self-governance only works when there is freedom of choice. This power of choice must remain strong.

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