

The Language of the School Choice Debates

There are two reasons why it is difficult to have a conversation about school choice: 1) there is no single commonly accepted definition of what choice in education means and 2) the language used is often driven by emotion instead of fact.

When trying to engage in efforts to promote a program of choice in education, the main talking points need to be crafted around the right of parents as the primary educators of their children to direct the type of schooling they think best fits the needs of their child and family. That is why the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and others in the Catholic school community use the term “parental” rather than “school” when talking about choice in schooling. For NCEA, parental rights need to be respected in public policy at the local, state and federal levels of government and should not depend on the ability to pay tuition to a private school or to live in a neighborhood where the public school system meets the needs of its children.

How should choice in education be defined? Some key ideas in crafting a definition would need to include a belief in educational freedom and a focus on the child to be educated, not the institutions or personnel who provide the instruction. Such a direction might help to dispel the myths that equate choice in education with divisiveness, fear and political agendas.

Choice in education is not a new idea – it has been part of schooling since the beginning of this nation. Traditionally, choices in education have been between public and private schooling, determined by how the school was financed. In the past few decades, definitions have expanded as public schools offer more choice in education options and some private school children receive public funding to support their family’s choice of a school. Today choice in education encompasses a range of options among public and private schools that include:

- A **charter school** is a public school that is established by parents, teachers, community groups and private organizations interested in forming a school with a focused mission, a smaller student population that facilitates creation of community, more innovative teaching practices, and greater parental and local community involvement.
- A **magnet school** is a public school that is organized around a specific program or philosophy and enrolls students across the district.

- Public school **inter-district or intra-district** enrollment allows students to attend schools outside their attendance zone, within or across district lines, without charge.

Parents have the following options available for private/religious – Catholic – schools:

- A **publicly funded voucher** is a payment the government makes to a parent, or an institution on a parent’s behalf, to be used for a child’s education expenses.
- A **privately funded voucher** is a payment that a private organization makes to a parent, or an institution on a parent’s behalf, to be used for a child’s education expenses.
- A **tax credit** provides direct reductions to an individual’s tax liability. A refundable credit allows for a tax refund if the credit exceeds the liability.
- A **tax deduction** is a reduction in taxable income made prior to the calculation of tax liability.
- A **private scholarship tax credit** allows individuals and businesses to take a tax credit for contributions to a private, nonprofit organization that provides scholarship aid for children to attend a school of their parents’ choosing.
- An **education savings account (ESA)** allows parents to receive a deposit of public education funds into government-authorized savings accounts with restricted education uses including tuition and fees.

Although many public opinion polls demonstrate that a strong preference for parental choice is growing in the United States, many indicate that they really don’t know what choice options are available or how they work. As enthusiasm for choice in education increases, fueled by the states where programs exist, Catholic parents and church leaders need to present a unified voice in advocating for educational freedom, a voice that uses success stories about current programs and their benefits for the families whose lives have been changed by parental choice—a voice that overcomes fear and political agendas.

To see what is happening with parental choice in your state and diocese, visit the National Association of State Catholic Conference Directors (NASCCD), www.nasccd.org.

Parental choice is the right thing to do – let’s make it happen for all, not just a few! ❖