

Opinion: It's time for school choice in CT

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July 8, 2022

As seen in:

CT INSIDER

The **DARIEN TIMES**

THE HOUR

NEW HAVEN REGISTER

ctpost

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time**



The U.S. Supreme Court building as seen last year.
File photo

There are plenty of issues occupying our hearts and minds these days. A school choice movement in Connecticut — providing parents in underperforming public school systems with vouchers and education savings accounts for better educational choices — should be among them, which could significantly impact the education of future generations.

The recent Supreme Court decision in *Carson v. Makin* supports the school choice movement by removing an obstacle to public funding that makes access to parochial schools a choice for more families in more states.

The issue in a nutshell

Many public school systems, often in inner cities, are underperforming, if not failing. Parents of children in these schools have few other public options. Yes, there are magnet and charter schools that are public, receive state funds and charge no tuition, but admission is determined by lottery, the luck of the draw.

This can and should change, as is happening on the topic of school choice in other states.

There is a better way

School choice brings accountability to all parties involved, saves taxpayer dollars and affords parents critical educational choices for their children. In Bridgeport, for example, it costs almost \$17,000 to educate each student. At parochial schools, the cost to educate students is significantly less and the outcomes achieved are far superior. At the Catholic Academy of Bridgeport, which educates approximately 900 pre-K through grade 8 students on four campuses, the cost of a child's education is only about \$7,000. More than 85 percent of Catholic Academy students cannot afford the annual tuition of \$5,150 and thus qualify for need-based financial assistance. Many families attend for as little as \$100 a month

The Catholic Academy of Bridgeport raises over \$2.2 million each year, provided by generous private donors and foundations to cover scholarship funding for those families in need. The academy welcomes students of all faiths; 40 percent of all students are non-Catholic. Importantly, teachers' pay is based on a merit system, where one of the factors in a teacher's compensation is the outcomes or success that their work brings to students.

Connecticut does not provide school choice programs like vouchers and education savings accounts to help parents with educational options and the funding to select a better alternative for their child, like Catholic Academy of Bridgeport.

School choice momentum in other states

Other states are catching on, particularly post-COVID. According to the Wall Street Journal, more than 30 states have introduced bills to establish or expand educational choice programs, including strongholds like Virginia and New Jersey that have traditionally opposed school choice. Providing parents a choice and helping to save taxpayer dollars have helped to remove other longstanding policy barriers.

One of these barriers is teachers unions, who naturally oppose school choice programs, claiming that funds to expand choice are taken from public schools. Yet this claim is not valid. In Indiana, legislators have funded voucher programs, yet 93 percent of all education funding still goes to public schools — not a drain at all. State legislators are stepping up to reject the idea that teachers unions should have a monopoly over how K-12 education dollars are spent. These states are leading the way in establishing education systems that give parents more choice, with better outcomes for their children and more productive use of city and state education dollars.

So why not in Connecticut?

Like many policy issues, change comes from building a coalition of support and leadership on topics that taxpayers care about.

According to the Friedman Foundation for Education Choice, as of May 2016, Connecticut provides no financial assistance (either in the form of vouchers or tax credits) to parents wishing to send their children to private schools in place of public schools. This must change.

Parochial schools, like the Catholic Academy of Bridgeport, provide better outcomes for students with fewer dollars than their public school counterparts, while saving taxpayer dollars. In Bridgeport alone, where the education budget is funded mostly at the state government level, choice programs would save all state taxpayers significantly. Most importantly, as parents are able to choose the educational model that best fits their children, student success would improve across the board. Thus, the prospects for Bridgeport as a whole improves, bringing further cost savings to Connecticut.

Vouchers should be adopted in Connecticut to give all parents, especially those in inner cities like Bridgeport, equal opportunities to educate their children at the best school of their choice while saving taxpayer dollars. We must demand this of our state legislators. The future of our children trapped in the state's underperforming public schools depends on it.

John J. Kennedy is on the board of Catholic Academy of Bridgeport.