



WHY GOOD TEACHERS WANT SCHOOL CHOICE

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What if schools had to compete for students in the same way that businesses have to compete for customers? Would schools get better or worse?

There's no need to guess.

In almost every state and city where there is competition today, educational outcomes improve – often dramatically. This competition is called school choice, and many states and cities now embrace it.

With the old model, under which most American children still live, the government – not the parent – decides which school children will attend.

Now, here's how school choice works:

The money follows the student. Every child receives funding that their parents can direct to the school of their choice – public, private, charter or even homeschool.

According to researchers at the University of Arkansas – in the most comprehensive study done to date – students in school choice programs saw their reading and math scores improve by 27 percent and 15 percent, respectively.

Sounds like something we should get behind, doesn't it? But for millions of families in my home state of California and in many others, school choice is not a choice.

And there's one reason why: teachers' unions.

I've been a teacher for 28 years, and served as a leader in a local affiliate of the California Teachers Association – so I've seen this problem from the inside. Teachers in California public schools are coerced to pay dues to the teachers' unions. True, we cannot be forced to join, but we are forced to pay the union. Their fees are mandatory - and expensive. In California alone, the unions raise over 300 million dollars every year. What do the unions do with all that money? They lobby the government for more money - more money for public education. That might sound good, but it's really just a smoke screen.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that since 1970, public school attendance in the U.S. has gone up by just five percent, while public school employment has gone up 95 percent!

More public school employment means more dues for the unions. But does it mean better schools? Certainly not in California, which ranks 45th in the nation in reading and math despite spending over 55 billion dollars a year on education. That's over 52% of the state's total budget. Yet rarely is anyone held accountable for these dismal results. I've personally seen excellent, new teachers lose their jobs while incompetent, and even abusive, veteran teachers keep theirs because of the unions' infamous "last in, first out" layoff and tenure rules.

For these reasons and more, parents almost always prefer school choice when allowed to choose. This is obviously true for wealthy parents who can afford to send their children to any school they want, but it's equally true for middle class and poor parents when they have a choice. And here's the real giveaway: public school teachers are less likely to send their children to public schools when given the choice.

Why are most school choice options better? Because teachers at these schools are free from the unions' stifling work rules. In short, they're free to teach. And the administrators at these schools are also free to reward good teachers and fire bad ones. The teachers' unions don't like school choice because it means less money and less power for them. That's why they'll say anything, do anything, and spend any amount to stop it – whether in the halls of the legislature, on the campaign trail backing pro-union candidates, or on TV with sweet-sounding commercials.

During my public school teaching career, I have worked alongside many other teachers to reform the unions from within. Only when we realized that this wasn't possible did we take our case to a higher power – literally: All the way to the United States Supreme Court. The argument behind our lawsuit, *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*, was simple: Teachers should be able to decide for themselves - without fear or coercion - whether or not to fund or join a union. Unfortunately, in a split 4-4 decision, we lost.

But I haven't lost hope, because the unions and the politicians do not ultimately have the power. We do. If you believe, like me and millions of others, that parents - not the government - should decide where their children go to school, and that competition will make all schools better, then join the school choice movement.

We can have good schools for all our children. We just have to make the choice – for choice.

I'm Rebecca Friedrichs, mother and California public school teacher, for Prager University.