

You Want ‘Education Choice’? Let Texas Be Your Example

The debate around school choice has shifted from whether states should enact education choice to how best to accomplish that goal.

In a special report released on Monday—co-published by The Heritage Foundation and the Texas Public Policy Foundation—we discuss how this question will be especially important in Texas, which is considering adopting education savings accounts, becoming a leader in the education choice movement.

What will now be critically important for Texas as it works to create education choice is that policymakers avoid adopting a flawed version of accountability.

The best way for policymakers in Texas and elsewhere to expand access to a high-quality education for all children is to provide all families with education savings accounts that give them the maximum possible freedom to choose the education providers that work best for their children.

In “Recalibrating Accountability: Education Savings Accounts as Vehicles of Choice and Innovation,” we outline ways in which policymakers can ensure parent-centered accountability is a key feature of education savings accounts in Texas.

Education savings accounts enable families to access a variety of educational options beyond the traditional classroom.

In addition to, or even instead of, enrolling at a private school, students using education savings accounts might learn from tutors, take a course online or at a local college, study from a homeschool curriculum or use some combination of these. Education savings accounts both empower parents to customize their child’s education and provide a platform for innovation.

Education savings accounts expand students' opportunities and make education providers more directly accountable to parents. But this new model of education will require rethinking the way we hold education providers accountable. And it's a rethinking that couldn't come soon enough. For far too long, parents have been deprived of genuine accountability.

That's because a lack of accountability is a hallmark of monopolies. District schools operate like monopolies because many parents have no viable alternatives. District schools are primarily accountable to politicians and un-elected bureaucrats, not parents, and they receive funding regardless of their performance or whether they are meeting the needs of families.

And because district schools are not held directly accountable to parents, some policymakers have attempted to impose accountability through top-down government regulations. Yet decades of attempts to regulate district schools into quality have had little effect.

Without question, parents and taxpayers have a legitimate interest in the accountability debate.

Parents should have robust, contextual information about how their children are performing and whether their education providers are setting them up to achieve their life goals and aspirations. Taxpayers, meanwhile, deserve transparency about how their dollars are being spent.

Unfortunately, too many policymakers have still come to see centralized government regulations as synonymous with "accountability" rather than an inferior alternative to direct accountability to parents and have therefore sought to impose similar regulations on choice programs.

At the center of the technocratic approach to accountability is the standardized testing mandate. Yet research has demonstrated that over-reliance on standardized math and

reading tests has the propensity to narrow the curriculum.

As a result, a uniform, statewide testing mandate can limit the supply of high-quality schools and education providers willing to participate in an education choice option as well as create an incentive for participating providers to teach to the test.

Parents and students can be better served by the numerous other market mechanisms that channel expert knowledge and user experience in order to make an informed decision. The plethora of college ratings providers is a good example of the types of information market eagerly provides.

Reviews such as *U.S. News & World Report*, *Princeton Review*, *Forbes*, *Kiplinger's* and *Business Insider* are examples of that. Sites like College Times, Students Review, Rate My Professors and Get Educated provide a platform for students to share information about their actual experiences at the college they attended.

Because the market for K-12 education is still relatively small, there are fewer ratings providers. Nevertheless, websites like and are already providing parents with vital information as well as platforms for parents and students to share their experiences.

As the market for K-12 education grows, we should expect to see even more expert reviewers and platforms for user reviews to fill the growing demand for such information.

Holding education providers directly accountable to parents through market-based mechanisms creates a feedback loop that does not exist in more centralized, top-down systems like the district schools. This process builds on strengths and corrects errors more effectively than regulatory fiat.

Universal Access

In addition to creating parent-driven accountability, policymakers must also consider the scope of program eligibility.

“Universality”—the policy of allowing all children to be eligible for an education savings account, in addition to ensuring every child can match learning options with their unique education needs—can create broad public support for an education choice initiative to increase its likelihood of long-term viability.

Moreover, universality breaks the link between where children live and what school they attend, creating competition among all schools to catalyze improvements for all children.

A robust education market will also require education providers to have the freedom to innovate and parents to have the freedom to choose the providers that best meet their child’s needs.

States therefore should avoid well-intentioned but misguided regulations such as open admissions requirements, price controls, state testing mandates and excessive reporting requirements.

Although intended to guarantee access and accountability, these regulations produce consequences that can reduce the effectiveness of education savings accounts and even undermine their goals.

It’s time for America’s education system to catch up to the 21st century. Our institution-centric system of district schools built for the industrial age is not well-equipped to educate children in the information age.

What’s needed now is a student-centric system that empowers parents to customize their child’s education. Education savings accounts are the most effective way yet designed to achieve that goal.

Texas should seize the opportunity to lead the way. {eoa}

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