



Commentary

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Private School Choice and the Turner Decision

By Michael Podgursky

Summary

The Missouri Legislature needs to act now and allow students in the unaccredited Saint Louis and Kansas City public school districts to attend alternative schools that have a proven track record of providing a good education.

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It is serendipitous that the Missouri Legislature has gone back to work this month, just in time for the kick-off of national School Choice Week (Jan. 22). One of the many challenges our lawmakers face is what to do regarding the Saint Louis and Kansas City public school districts. The Missouri Supreme Court ruled in the Turner decision that students in unaccredited school districts have a right to enroll in a nearby accredited district. Unfortunately, the suburban districts have made it clear that they will not accept these students in any significant numbers. Thus, thousands of city students and their parents are in limbo while lawsuits are litigated.

The good news is that two high-performing school districts have offered to take these students in large numbers. These districts do a great job of educating high poverty and minority children, and do so at much less than the \$15,000 and \$16,000 per attending student spent in Kansas City and Saint Louis, respectively. Moreover, decades of social science research has demonstrated that the types of schools that these districts run are exceptionally good at educating poor urban youth. So why isn't our legislature rushing to take advantage of this remedy? The districts in question are the Saint Louis and Kansas City dioceses. This high-quality yet affordable option is off the table.

Why? Opponents argue that it is inappropriate to provide public funds for private religious schools. Indeed, strong language to that effect — Blaine Amendments, named in honor of the Maine senator who led the movement — was placed in Missouri's and some other state constitutions in the late-19th century precisely to prevent public monies from flowing to Catholic schools.

The Blaine Amendment, and the associated ideology, has warped K-12 education policy. In other areas of policy — including education — faith-based organizations routinely receive tax dollars to provide services for the general public. Missouri students can take their Bright Flight or Access Missouri scholarships to public

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institutions like the University of Missouri as well as private religiously-affiliated colleges such as Hannibal-Lagrange, Saint Louis University, or Rockhurst. Low-income parents in Missouri can use tax-supported vouchers to purchase pre-school care from religiously-affiliated providers.

In nearly all other areas of social welfare policy, public funds flow to faith-based organizations for social services. This is based on a recognition that government support for a service does not mean the government should be the only, or even the primary, producer. The public interest is best served if multiple vendors can compete to provide services and give consumers choices.

Freedom of choice is the key. In a voucher system where money follows the student to a school that parents choose, government is not favoring one religious doctrine over another. When a student takes his Bright Flight scholarship to Hannibal-LaGrange College or Saint Louis University, the state is not “establishing” or promoting one religious doctrine over another.

Charter schools provide valuable options to parents. The Missouri law, currently limited to just Kansas City and Saint Louis, should be extended to all school districts statewide. However, the charter schools currently operating in Saint Louis and Kansas City have a mixed achievement record. Some are producing above-average achievement gains for their students, whereas many are performing no better, and in some cases significantly worse, than the district schools. Over time, the low performers will be winnowed out. Unfortunately, substantial capacity of high-performing charters is needed now, not 10 years from now.

With each passing school day, the harm inflicted on Saint Louis and Kansas City children grows. The private schools have thousands of seats available for these children now. A remedy is looking us in the face.

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