

Opinion:

School choice is the key to improving education

By Alan Bonsteel, [Los Angeles Daily News](#), July 7, 2010

On June 15, the state of California missed the constitutional deadline to pass a budget. The next weeks will see the ugliest and most heart-wrenchingly painful budget negotiations in the history of the state as we deal with a \$20 billion deficit after having already cut to the bone last year.

The cause of our recession was the funny-money mortgages that precipitated a meltdown in our housing market. But we all recognize what made this recession far more painful than in other states: the meltdown of our public schools and the stratospheric rate of dropouts who have jammed our prisons.

We're not only paying through the nose for those bulging prisons, but every young person who could have been somebody, and instead became a convicted nobody, vaporizes income tax receipts forever.

The time to think ahead to where we want to be in 20 years is now. We desperately need a public education system that graduates well-educated young people at 98 percent rates, not the 62.7 percent California graduation rate revealed in the latest issue of "Education Week."

Study after study has shown that giving families a wide range of attractive options keeps their kids in school. Most school choice programs offer admission by lottery, so the rich and the poor get the same chance of entry. These lottery systems have given us a superb natural experiment in how school choice influences graduation rates. We simply have to look at the numbers of kids graduating from school choice programs and compare them to randomized losers in the lottery, who remain trapped in traditional public schools.

In the nation's oldest K-12 voucher program in a Milwaukee school district, a May 2008 study by the University of Minnesota showed a 20 percent higher graduation rate in the voucher schools. And in charter schools nationwide, a March 2010 study by Mathematica Policy Research showed that the nation's charter schools were increasing graduation rates by 7 to 15 percent. These results are consistent with the common-sense observation that when families are allowed the right to choose the best possible schools for their children, their kids are far more likely to stick around to graduation day. And, in all of these choice programs, the per-student cost to the taxpayers is far lower than in traditional public schools.

The lottery systems in school choice programs have also inspired the film "The Lottery," now packing movie houses across the nation. The closing scenes of the lotteries, showing the agonized, tearful faces of parents and children who lose and are doomed to traditional public schools, have left audiences in tears everywhere, and have forced even former defenders of the public school monopoly to ask themselves, "Why should it be necessary to win a lottery to get the basic human right of a decent education?"

Throughout the nation, among the 20 private-school scholarship programs now in existence, many of the most successful have been aimed at special-needs children. A June 30 study by the Pacific Research Institute has shown that a scholarship program for California families welcoming foster care children into their homes would likely save the state money, while improving the educational opportunities of these deserving kids and making it more likely that couples would be willing to become foster parents.

At a time when we need school reform as never before, some of the morons who run our public schools have called for a moratorium on new California charter schools, which get less than 80 percent of the funding of our traditional public schools. It is time to get in the faces of those losers and tell them we are taking back our schools.

The time for school reform is now.

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