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School Scholarships Overturn Parent's Apathy

By John R. LaPlante

A friend recently said to me that “teachers do try to get parents involved, but I know someone who works in a poverty-stricken, poorly performing school. She tells me that the parents just don’t care when she tells them that their children are failing.”

Are these parents uncaring, or is it that our laws encourage them to feel hopeless?

Money can’t buy happiness, but it can buy options. If you don’t have much money, you don’t have many options, and perhaps not much hope, either. That’s a recipe for educational disaster.

Too many low-income families face this scenario. If they don’t like the nearest grocery store, they can always go to one a little further away. But if their children’s school is abysmal, they’re stuck. Oh, they might know of a school with excellent teachers and a disciplined learning environment. But it’s in another neighborhood, where the rent, let alone a house payment, is out of reach.

So the family must resort to cajoling, pleading, and making threats. In another word: politics. But the poor are not a strong political force. Money always gets the attention of a politician, and they don’t have any. A poor person may have never learned how to be politically savvy. So “the powers that be”—the politicians, the administrators, the teachers union—run the show, and the parents know it.

Is it any wonder that some of them stop caring?

Civic-minded citizens must do something. So some people donate to private scholarship foundations, which give help such parents put their children in a better school. Sometimes, a \$1,000 scholarship makes all the difference between a child’s bleak future in a bad school and achieving in a strong one. Twelve states even have voucher or tax-credit laws to make this happen.

There are several benefits to schools of choice, whether they are charter schools or private schools. Often, the students who attend these schools start to improve. One reason, to go back to my friend’s complaint, is that parents start to care.

Why? First of all, they’re no longer hopeless, since they’ve been able to make a choice. And

since these schools depend on enrollment to survive—parents can always return their children to district schools, after all—they have an incentive to listen to parents. This consumer-friendly attitude encourages parents to care.

Next, schools of choice often develop a culture of success. I've toured one charter school, for example, where teachers ask students not "Will you graduate from high school?", but "What college are you going to attend?" Nearly all of this school's families are poor, and most have never sent a child to college.

Finally, schools of choice often establish expectations for parents, too. Though charter public schools must take all comers, for example, some create a "contract," or set of expectations, between the teachers and the parents. A contract is possible because the parents actively choose the school.

Nobody, especially a government official, can make parents care. But if our laws expand the choices available to parents, more of them will.

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