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An Idea Whose Time Has Come

By John R. LaPlante

Sometimes it takes a while before the power of a good idea takes hold.

Over 50 years ago, Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman suggested that taxpayers fund education rather than schools. On February 12, 2007, Utah's governor, Jon Huntsman, Jr., signed the Parent Choice in Education Act an act designed to do just that.

Under the new Utah law, families receive \$500 to \$3,000 scholarships for tuition. The amount of money depends on family income, with low-income families receiving more.

Privately owned schools that enroll students receiving the scholarships must meet specified health and safety regulations and administer norm-referenced tests. They must also meet certain financial guidelines and submit to the state board of education a financial statement prepared by a certified public accountant.

By enacting the scholarship plan, Utah has created the nation's first universal school choice measure. While there are 20 schools-of-choice programs running in 11 states, they are all restricted in various ways. Some are for special needs students only. For other programs, families must reside in a particular city, have no more than a fixed amount of income or attend a chronically failing school.

The Utah measure, by contrast, applies to every student who currently attends a government-run school in the state. That amounts to nearly 95 percent of all Utah children of school age, or approximately 500,000 students (by comparison, public school enrollment in Kansas is about 442,000).

Elisa Peterson, who led the push for the act, said, "Utah is getting to the core of what education is all about learning should be tailored to each student. Utah parents want the freedom to choose education based on their child's unique needs."

Studies from voucher and other choice programs throughout the country suggest this freedom will lead to academic gains for these students.

By definition, parents will have an increased ability to exercise choice, the same force that powers improvements in our economy. Of particular note is the fact that families currently unable to afford a move to a different school district can now get help in choosing a private school. George Clowes, former editor of School Reform News, applauded the legislation, noting

that it refutes the insulting idea that “most parents and low-income and minority parents in particular just aren't capable of choosing the best school for their child.”

In discussions of vouchers or tax credits, attention quickly shifts to the government-run schools. Will they suffer as a result of this plan?

It's going to be hard to make that case, especially since the law has a “hold harmless” provision for them. Even after a student leaves, the district receives a portion of its state funds. That's right. Even though the district no longer has responsibility for that student, it gets to keep some of the money allocated by the state. And it gets to keep getting that money for up to five years after the student leaves. If that doesn't make sense, chalk it up to the necessities of political compromise.

There's another set of people who will benefit from the law. Parents of students who remain in government-run schools can look forward to academic benefits. In Arizona, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, and other states, the record is clear. Competition prompts both private and public schools to improve. When schools compete for students, students learn more.

The insight of Milton Friedman was that while there may be a taxpayer interest in funding education, government need not operate the schools that provide education. “Governments could require a minimum level of education,” he wrote, “which they could finance by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on ‘approved’ educational services.” He called the GI Bill, which gave funds to World War II veterans to attend the college of their choice, “an excellent example of a program of this sort.”

Thanks to the work of the Utah legislators and governor, this “excellent example” is finally being applied to better the education of students. Kansans should not wait another 50 years to follow suit. It is time for our students to have access to the benefits of competition and the ability to choose the education option that best meets their needs.

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