

# Three Perspective Shifts to Advance Choice

By Robert Enlow and Jason Bedrick

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## Key Points

- Educational choice should remain central to the conservative education agenda. Nevertheless, conservatives need to shift their efforts to advance choice in three ways.
- First, shift from discussing “school choice” to “educational choice,” to recognize that formal education need not take place in a traditional classroom.
- Second, rhetoric about the problem of “failing” district schools has led conservatives to support policies that are unnecessarily divisive and restrictive. Shift to discussing “finding the right fit” instead.
- Third, shift from top-down accountability to bottom-up accountability, to avoid establishing perverse incentives that distort how subjects are taught and limit innovation.

Since the Ronald Reagan era, the conservative K–12 education agenda has centered on two ideas: choice and accountability. The time has come for conservatives to rethink how to put these principles into practice.

Initially, “choice” meant school vouchers, and “accountability” meant standards and high-stakes testing. Rather than leave education to politicians and bureaucrats, conservatives wanted to empower families to choose their children’s schools—including religious ones—in a market. Meanwhile, educational excellence would be achieved by attaching rewards and penalties to performance as measured by standardized tests.

There was always a tension between choice and the regulatory view of accountability—and since the late 1990s, the conservative movement’s emphasis was decidedly on the latter. The George W. Bush-era No Child Left Behind initiative paid lip service to choice but mainly used federal carrots and sticks

to impose test-based accountability on states. When these reforms failed, accountability hawks doubled down via Common Core. The new regulations sparked a fierce backlash from parents and educators alike but failed yet again to move the needle. Tom Loveless recently concluded that despite billions spent on implementation, “the evidence suggests student achievement is, at best, about where it would have been if Common Core had never been adopted.”<sup>1</sup>

Technocratic tinkering has failed to produce the promised results. It is time, instead, for conservatives to double down on choice. This approach is both more in line with conservative principles and a prerequisite for many conservative goals.

A central conservative insight is the essentiality of strong families to a well-ordered and free society. At their core, choice policies are family centered, empowering parents to choose learning environments that are the right fit for their children based

on their intimate knowledge of their children’s learning needs, social situation, and emotional well-being. Choice also respects families’ freedom to choose schools in line with their values and faith traditions.

Conservatives have also long championed free markets over government bureaucracies as a means to address social challenges. As the American Enterprise Institute’s Yuval Levin has argued, markets enable the channeling of “social knowledge from the bottom up” rather than “impos[ing] technical knowledge from the top down” via a Hayekian three-step process of “experimentation, evaluation, and evolution.”

Markets are ideally suited to following these steps. They offer entrepreneurs and businesses a huge incentive to try new ways of doing things (experimentation); the people directly affected decide which ways they like best (evaluation); and those consumer responses inform which ways are kept and which are left behind (evolution).

This three-step process is at work well beyond the bounds of explicitly economic activity. It is how our culture learns and evolves, how norms and habits form, and how society as a general matter “decides” what to keep and what to change. It is an exceedingly effective way to balance stability with improvement, continuity with alteration, tradition with dynamism. It involves conservation of the core with experimentation at the margins in an effort to attain the best of both.<sup>2</sup>

When education providers have the freedom to innovate and families exercise their freedom to choose the providers that work best for them, the entire system organically adapts to changing needs and circumstances.

Conservatives are right to pursue educational excellence and civic literacy, but achieving these ends cannot be successfully mandated from above. Fortunately, conservatives have important allies in the pursuit of these goals: families. It is no wonder then that research overwhelmingly finds that choice

programs boost academic performance, raise graduation rates, and improve a host of civic outcomes such as civic knowledge, political tolerance, voluntarism, political participation, and patriotism.<sup>3</sup>

Choice in and of itself is not a panacea, but it is the surest path forward to achieve these ends. Nevertheless, conservatives need to shift their efforts to advance choice in three ways.

## **1. Shift from “School Choice” to “Educational Choice”**

This goes beyond a change in branding, such as calling vouchers “opportunity scholarships.” Rather, it’s a paradigm and policy shift recognizing that formal education need not take place in a traditional classroom. Whereas vouchers and charters allowed parents to choose among schools, education savings accounts empower families to customize their child’s education using a variety of options, including microschools, hybrid homeschooling,<sup>4</sup> online instruction, tutoring, and educational therapy.

Importantly, these options allow families to pursue classical education, a content-rich history and civics curriculum, and more rigorous curriculum generally where these opportunities are otherwise lacking.

## **2. Shift from “Escaping Failing Schools” to “Finding the Right Fit”**

For too long, conservative rhetoric about the problem of “failing” district schools has led them to support policies that are unnecessarily divisive and restrictive. Predicating eligibility for choice programs on district schools’ test scores needlessly pits families and choice advocates against educators and schools. Moreover, such policies needlessly exclude children in dire need of access to educational alternatives.

Even a school with high test scores may be a poor fit for some children, while a school with low test scores may be great for others. Children’s access to a learning environment that’s the right fit for them shouldn’t depend on the average test score of the school down the street.

The “failing schools” paradigm also makes choice only about providing equity for the disadvantaged rather than systemic change. Equity is

certainly important—it is a matter of justice—but significant improvements will require large-scale changes in how education is delivered. Low-income programs may fill empty seats at existing private schools, but they do little to foster innovation and excellence. Systemic improvement requires sufficient demand to induce new market entrants. That, in turn, requires making more well-off families eligible for choice programs too. Ultimately, the disadvantaged will benefit the most when they are in the same proverbial boat as everyone else.

### 3. Shift from Top-Down to Bottom-Up Accountability

Some technocratic conservatives have attempted to blend choice and accountability by imposing states' standardized tests on choice programs. While well-intentioned, such policies are misguided. Mandating a single test and attaching consequences for performance incents spending less time on non-tested subjects and concepts and distorts how tested subjects are taught.<sup>5</sup> Studies have shown that overregulating choice programs

leads to fewer participating schools,<sup>6</sup> less specialization,<sup>7</sup> and, ironically, perhaps even lower quality.<sup>8</sup>

For too long, we have confused “accountability” with government regulations, but the latter are but a pale imitation of the former. True accountability is when service providers are directly accountable to the people who bear the consequences of their performance. As Levin described, systemic improvement requires “experimentation, evaluation, and evolution.” Technocrats restrict education providers' ability to innovate and substitute their own judgment in place of parents' judgment, thereby interrupting this process. By contrast, when schools are directly accountable to parents, it creates the feedback loop necessary for systemic evolution.

In conclusion, conservatives who want to achieve educational excellence should abandon technocracy and embrace choice. To modify Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman's famous observation about the relationship between freedom and equality: A society that puts accountability before choice will get neither. A society that puts choice before accountability will get a high degree of both.

## About the Authors

**Robert Enlow** is president and CEO of EdChoice.

**Jason Bedrick** is director of policy at EdChoice and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute.

## Notes

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2. Yuval Levin, “The Roots of a Reforming Conservatism,” *Modern Age*, April 20, 2015, <https://isi.org/modern-age/the-roots-of-a-reforming-conservatism-2/>.

3. EdChoice, “The 123s of School Choice,” April 15, 2020, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-123s-of-school-choice/>; and Patrick J. Wolf, “Civics Exam,” *Education Next* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2007), <https://www.educationnext.org/civics-exam/>.

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5. Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick, “Recalibrating Accountability: Education Savings Accounts as Vehicles of Choice and Innovation,” Heritage Foundation, December 12, 2016, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/recalibrating-accountability-education-savings-accounts-vehicles-choice-and>.

6. Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey Burke, and Patrick Wolf, “The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from California and New York” (working paper, University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, Fayetteville, AR, March 12, 2019), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3349453>.

7. Lindsey Burke and Corey DeAngelis, “Does Regulation Reduce Specialization?,” EdChoice, March 14, 2019, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/does-regulation-reduce-specialization/>.
8. Corey DeAngelis, “Voucher Regulation Reduces Quality of Private School Options,” *Education Next*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.educationnext.org/voucher-regulation-reduces-quality-private-school-options/>.

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