

SCHOOL CHOICE

"Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past and present are certain to miss the future."
– John F. Kennedy

The 114th Tennessee General Assembly will convene on January 14th, 2025. School Choice will take center stage, as it has become the "hot potato" of Tennessee politics. It is an emotional issue with many, so logic and reason become the first casualties.

This article begins with President Kennedy's quote above because change is what we are really discussing. Changes in the way we fund our schools and educate our children. Change is always scary, mainly because we have learned how to function in the current system. If you believe our current education system is the best in the world, that our children are getting the best education possible, then there is no reason to change.

However, if you believe our education system needs to improve, that our children deserve better, then things must change.

Personally, this writer believes in parental rights and parental choice in education. Parents are in the best position to know what is best for their child, not the state. However, that does not mean blanket support for any proposal. There are questions that need to be answered, such as: **Why parents choose to leave the public school system they are already paying for?**

Current State:

There are options to public schools for parents in Tennessee today. Each with varying success but they do give parents options to tailor to their child's needs.

- Private Schools, for those who can afford it.
- Charter or Magnet Schools, if space available.
- Home Schooling.
- Limited Voucher program, for worst performing public schools. (very limited)

The first thing some will say is we need to spend more on public education, as if money will solve all the problems. Yes, schools must receive adequate funds, and teachers must receive adequate pay. But after we reach that point, does more money actually fix things?*

*According to a report published in 2023 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the U.S. spends 38% more per student for K-12 education than other member countries.

Questions that need answers:

What is in the best interest of our children?

This should always be the first question asked. The purpose of the taxes we pay should be to ensure the children of Tennessee get the best education possible, not fund an entrenched bureaucracy or placate teacher's unions.

What is the goal? What are we trying to accomplish?

School vouchers, same as the other options for education, are a means to an end. The goal we are trying to achieve, and how the voucher proposal will help us reach that goal has not been clearly defined.

What about the children left behind?

The current school voucher proposal has a limited focus. Not all students will be able to take advantage of vouchers. What happens to them? What actions will we take to improve "failing schools"? There is nothing in the current proposal that addresses these issues.

Why is Home Schooling excluded?

The original idea was "the money follows the child". Why now exclude home schooling?

Legislation has been introduced, sides are being chosen.

Soon our airwaves and mailboxes will be flooded with ads from PAC's outside Tennessee, vilifying whoever doesn't support their view. Even though both sides have valid points to consider, we will stop listening to each other. Facts, logic, and reason will be replaced by volume, as if whoever shouts the loudest wins the debate.

There are ways forward that can provide parents more control over their child's education and improve our public schools. Unfortunately, no one seems interested in finding this common ground.

Sadly, the real losers in all this will be the children of Tennessee. They deserve better.

Contact your state representatives.

Encourage them to do what is best for our children.

<https://capitol.tn.gov/legislators/>