

### **Pennsylvania Needs To Emulate Indiana's School Choice Plan**

Another school year is underway and true school choice in Pennsylvania is still far from becoming a reality. Meanwhile, neighboring Ohio's school choice program keeps growing and Indiana just instituted the nation's broadest voucher program. A major attempt to enact vouchers in the Commonwealth was made by the Senate last spring, and had support from Governor Corbett, but unfortunately, failed to gain traction in the House.

Pennsylvania's students and education system could certainly benefit from following Indiana's lead. Indiana's voucher program allows parents to take the state's tuition support dollars for their children and use it to send their students to an eligible school. An eligible school can be either public or private as long as it's located within the state and voluntarily enrolls vouchered students. In addition, the school has to be accredited and must administer the state's assessment exam.

One criticism leveled at the voucher program by teacher unions and other groups is that most parents are choosing religious schools. In fact, opponents of Indiana's law are suing on the grounds it violates that state's constitutionally mandated separation of church and state. However, this matter has already been addressed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The nation's highest court heard similar arguments regarding Cleveland's voucher program in 2002. The Court ruled 5-4 that the voucher program did not violate the U.S. Constitution because the children are not forced to go to religious schools. The voucher goes to parents who choose the schools.

Indiana's program is the most inclusive of the voucher programs across the country. Most voucher laws restrict eligibility to low income students whereas the Indiana law sets the bar higher and includes middle income children as well. Any student is eligible as long as the household income is less than 150 percent of the amount required to qualify for the federal free lunch or reduced lunch program. For the current academic year, to qualify for a free lunch the maximum household income for a family of four is \$29,055 and for a reduced lunch the amount is \$41,348. Thus the maximum household income for a family of four to qualify for a voucher is over \$60,000.

Under the terms of the program, Indiana will provide the smallest of three amounts: the sum of tuition and other charges by the school receiving the voucher payment; 90 percent

of the state school subsidy for those whose household income qualifies them for free lunches; or 50 percent for those who qualify for reduced cost lunches. In any case, the maximum amount for a student in first through eighth grade is \$4,500. The number of scholarships is capped at 7,500 in this current school year but will double in the 2012-2013 school year. The number of scholarships available at an eligible school is also limited. If a school has more vouchered students than spaces available, they must use a random drawing for admission.

Indiana public schools, like those in Pennsylvania, rely on a mix of federal, state, and local dollars for funding. Residents in both states pay a property tax to fund the local share of education. However, the millages in Indiana are capped so that districts with higher property values do not have an advantage. It is estimated that about 80 to 90 percent of a district's funding comes from the state. Pennsylvania by contrast has a funding formula for state support that provides very high percentages of school expenditures for the poorer districts while wealthier receive much lower percentages of funding from the state.

Which brings up the next criticism by opponents: vouchers drain funds from school districts. For the current school year, the Indiana government budgeted \$6.3 billion in state tuition support for its districts covering about 956,000 public school students. To cover the cost of 7,500 vouchers, at the first through eighth maximum of \$4,500, would cost Indiana taxpayers \$33.75 million—about one half of one percent of the state's tuition support. While it is true that the funds follow the student, the district from which the student left should also have lower costs as a result of the student's departure and thus the loss in revenues should be at least partially offset by the reduction in expenses. Moreover, the loss would be primarily in state funds but not the local funds. The school district could keep the same property tax millage and thus see no reduction in its property tax revenues.

While critics of vouchers claim they will hollow out school districts by removing some of the better students, isn't that already happening as families in poorly performing school districts are voting with their feet resulting in enrolment declines and loss of taxpayers? And where is the morality in chaining students who want a good education to poorly performing or unsafe schools? After all, isn't the justification for compulsory school attendance that children need an education so they can become productive members of society? When we spend vast sums keeping kids in schools where education is not occurring we are wasting scarce monetary resources and the children's time. An immoral act if there ever was one. By letting parents choose the school that best fits their child's needs, the goal of a better education is closer to being realized. It is now up to Pennsylvania to step up and make it happen.

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