

"A BEAUTIFUL FILM—TREMENDOUSLY MOVING! ...EVERYONE WHO VALUES DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION NEEDS TO SEE THIS."

— JONATHAN KOZOL, ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND AUTHOR OF *SAVAGE INEQUALITIES*



A FILM EXPLORING THE REAL COST OF PRIVATIZING AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BACKPACK FULL OF CASH

NARRATED BY MATT DAMON

STONE LANTERN FILMS AND TURNSTONE PRODUCTIONS PRESENT
"BACKPACK FULL OF CASH" NARRATED BY MATT DAMON PRODUCED BY SARAH MONDALE VERA ARONOW
EDITED BY VERA ARONOW MARIAN SEARS HUNTER CINEMATOGRAPHY BY ROGER GRANGE ORIGINAL MUSIC BY TOM PHILLIPS
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DISCUSSION GUIDE





Sarah Mondale



Vera Aronow

Message from the Filmmakers

We both grew up with a deep respect for public education—we were taught that it was a cornerstone of American democracy, on par with the Declaration of Independence.

Sarah: My grandmother was a music teacher who taught for a time in a one-room schoolhouse. My mother taught English to adult immigrants. I myself am a former teacher. My father, a marvelous historian, loved to tell me about this country's longstanding respect for public education. "Just look at the Northwest Ordinance," he would say. "When we were barely even a country, all the new states had to set aside land for public universities and 'forever encourage schools.'"

Vera: I grew up in the Philadelphia metro area, and had so many family members involved in public schools it was hard to keep track of them all—nurses, librarians, teachers and, of course, students. My mother went to school in West Philadelphia and in her later years, in her nineties, she could not believe the devastating budget cuts.

As the attacks on public schools and teachers increased in recent years, we became worried. We decided to do something about it.

It took us five years to make *Backpack Full of Cash*, and our fundamental concern has not changed: Why dismantle our public school system? Instead, why not make it work for every child?

While making this film, we met so many wonderful students, teachers, and activists who inspired us. We hope you also find them inspiring, and take action to strengthen—not abandon—our system of public education.

Sarah Mondale, Director/Producer

Vera Aronow, Producer/Editor

August 2017

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How to Use This Guide

This guide is a supplement to *Backpack Full of Cash* and is designed to promote a conversation on the future of public education. As the film dramatically underscores, our public schools are under threat from a privatization movement that undermines the dream of quality public schools for all children, and weakens the inherent link between public education and democracy.

What a film can do

Films such as *Backpack Full of Cash* reach people on an immediate and emotional level, opening them up to new ideas. They provide a common reference point to start a conversation. They put a human face on complex social, racial, and civic issues.

A film screening can serve as a powerful organizing opportunity, but it's important that you consider what you want to achieve. Do you want to raise awareness? Encourage collaboration among groups? With this in mind, the most effective screening allows for a facilitated discussion afterward, providing a chance to talk about and act on the film's ideas.

Backpack Full of Cash covers many topics. Groups might want a wide-ranging discussion, or might focus on topics that are confronting their community. This guide is arranged primarily by topic, making it easier to photocopy particular sections. Discussion leaders should also develop questions that speak to their community's concerns.

Structuring the discussion

To the extent possible, allow people to break into small groups from time to time, and then come back together to share the small-group discussions. Make sure everyone gets a chance to talk, and no one group or person dominates. Stress that all questions and perspectives are welcome. Offer a local context for major issues in the film.

Immediately after seeing the film

Backpack Full of Cash has many powerful stories. People may need to process those emotions before launching into a wide-ranging discussion. Here are possible opening questions:

- In one or two words, describe how you felt after watching *Backpack Full of Cash*.
- Can you share a moment in the film that particularly stood out to you? Why?
- What was the main message you took away from the film?
- What was something new you learned?
- What in the film made you hopeful?

At the end of the discussion

- Summarize key points made during the discussion. What did people consider the most important problems? What can be done to solve those problems?
- Make sure people have signed up on your contact list.
- Don't let people go home without suggestions or possibilities for further action—ways that they can be involved in supporting local, state, or federal policies that strengthen public schools.
- Provide contact information for elected officials involved in education. Have a list of local organizations.

Note: In this guide, quotes from the film have been condensed for length.



“I love Philadelphia. We’re standing up because we’re tired of what they’re doing to this beautiful city we’re living in. They are robbing our kids. And it’s wrong.”

—Philadelphia protester, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

Public Schools, Charters, and Vouchers: What's the Difference?

Public Schools

Every state constitution guarantees the right to a free and public education for all children. Public schools have historically been locally controlled, with policy set at the state level. In almost all school districts, public schools are overseen by a democratically elected school board.

Public school districts are required to serve all children. Students can enroll throughout the year.

Charter Schools

Charters generally are considered public schools, but they are privately run. They may not charge tuition and cannot teach religion.

These schools are granted “charters” that exempt them from a range of regulations, with the hope of improved academic outcomes. Oversight of charters is based on state law and can vary significantly. Some states allow for-profit charter schools and/or cyberschools.

Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are governed by appointed boards not subject to public oversight or approval. Board members are not required to live in the community the school serves. Charter schools can limit their enrollment and do not have to admit students after the school year begins. Students usually must apply.

Because charter schools are a hybrid of public and private, there are many gray areas in terms of public transparency and student and employee rights. In 2013, the National Labor Relations Board ruled in favor of a Chicago charter that said it was a private institution and came under private sector labor law.

Voucher Schools

Voucher schools are private schools that enroll students receiving publicly funded “vouchers” that pay partial or full tuition. Most are religious schools, including Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, and Muslim institutions.

Voucher schools do not have the same legal responsibilities as public schools and operate with minimal oversight or transparency.

Private schools, for instance, do not have to provide the same level of special education services as public schools. They can sidestep basic constitutional protections such as freedom of speech or due process when students are expelled. They generally do not have to follow requirements for open meetings and records.

Religious voucher schools can teach church doctrine that is at odds with public policy, for instance basing their science classes on creationism or teaching that homosexuality is a sin or women should be obedient to men.



“[The voucher program] was not about helping these poor little school children get access to better schools. It was about politics and making sure that the religious conservatives in Louisiana had a way to continue their schools at public expense.”

—Karran Harper Royal, New Orleans parent and activist, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

Discussion Questions

***Backpack Full of Cash* shows religious schools in Louisiana funded with public tax dollars. Is this a good idea? Why or why not?**

***Backpack Full of Cash* shows the dynamic between closing traditional public schools and opening charter schools. What lessons might one draw from the Philadelphia experience?**

Fast Facts and Statistics

Enrollment

Public Schools: There are [more than](#) 13,500 public school districts, serving approximately 50 million students in the United States. In 2013, [low-income students](#) became a majority of K-12 public school students, and in 2014 students of color [became a majority](#). [Almost 10 percent](#) of public school students do not speak English as their first language. Teachers of color make up [less than 20 percent](#) of the teaching force.

Charters: There are about 6,800 charters in 44 states and the District of Columbia, serving almost three million students, or [more than 6 percent](#) of the nation's public school students. Charters are [especially strong](#) in urban areas (see page 8). In Philadelphia, whose struggle is highlighted in *Backpack Full of Cash*, 32 percent of students attend charter schools. Cyberschools, sometimes called “virtual schools,” are [a growing phenomenon](#).

Vouchers and Private Schools: There are 61 different initiatives in 28 states that fund private schools through a range of programs, either directly via tuition vouchers or indirectly through tax initiatives (see pages 9-10 for details). Roughly 1.3 million students took part in a voucher or voucher-like program in 2017. Overall, private schools serve [about 10 percent](#) of the nation's children. Private school students are [disproportionately white](#), especially in the South and West. Most private schools are religious.

“Push-out” of Students

The ability of schools to “push out” seemingly undesirable students has long been a concern in public education. The charter school movement, especially in urban areas, appears to be exacerbating the problem. A 2016 study from the University of California-Los Angeles, [the first comprehensive analysis](#) of suspensions by charter schools, found that the average suspension rate for all charter schools in 2011-12 was 7.8 percent compared to an average for non-charter schools of 6.7 percent. While seemingly a small difference, this means that the charter school suspension rate was 16 percent higher.

Charter schools also suspended students with disabilities at a higher rate than non-charters: 15.5 percent for charters compared with 13.7 percent for non-charters.

The UCLA report noted that some charter schools have a particularly disturbing record. Nationally, more than 500 charters suspended Black charter students at a rate at least 10 percentage points higher than for white students. And 235 charter schools suspended more than 50 percent of their students with disabilities.

In New York City, charter schools enrolled under 7 percent of the district's students, but accounted for nearly [42 percent of all suspensions](#) in 2014, the most recent data available.

Data from private schools about their suspension, expulsion, or “push-out” rates is often unavailable and unreliable, because they do not have the same reporting requirements as traditional public schools or charter schools.

Selective Student Bodies

As with the “push-out” of students, a school's ability to shape student enrollment can intensify the problem of unequal opportunity. Concern has grown over charter school enrollment practices that exacerbate inequities, such as selective marketing, contracts that require parents to commit to a certain number of volunteer hours, or limited time frames for enrollment. Overall, research has shown that charter schools are [increasing re-segregation](#) by race, class, special education status, and English language learner status.

Test Scores

Studies consistently note that, overall, test scores are not significantly different in private voucher, charter, and public schools. Cyberschools, however, consistently score below public schools.

Discussion Questions

What are ways that schools can select their students or push out students who may be deemed “undesirable”? How might this affect the schools without such policies?

History of Charter Schools

Backpack Full of Cash shows the negative effects that charter schools have had on Philadelphia's public school district. That reality differs from the original vision behind charters.

Charter schools were originally conceived as teacher-run schools that would serve a small number of struggling students and provide “models of innovation” to improve all public schools.

Charters first appeared, often with community and teacher union support, in urban districts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The schools were granted a “charter” that exempted them from many regulations governing a traditional public school. In exchange, they were to experiment, improve academic achievement, and share the lessons learned.

Over the years, the charter school movement has changed dramatically. While there are high-quality individual charter schools, the charter *movement* has become a national and well-funded campaign organized by investors, foundations, and educational management companies to create a parallel, more privatized school system with less public accountability and less democratic oversight. The Walton Foundation, perhaps [the most aggressive funder of this movement](#), has given money to a quarter of all charter schools.

Some charter schools now claim their methods and curriculum are “proprietary” and not to be shared publicly—in direct contradiction with the original charter school vision as a way to share best practices. Some “no excuses” charters focus their “innovation” on discipline policies that resemble rules of behavior in military schools or prisons, raising concerns that there is a higher priority on obedience than on education.

No one questions the desire of parents to find the best options they can for their children. But

as a policy approach to improving education for all, charters have not lived up to their promise. Overall charter schools' academic achievement is either at the same level, or below, that of comparable public schools.

Since 2008, the number of charter schools has grown by almost 50 percent. Over that same period, conservative estimates indicate that 4,000 traditional public schools [have closed](#), [disproportionately in communities of color](#). This has facilitated a huge transfer of resources and students from public schools to privatized charter schools. In cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia, it has also led to the loss of teachers of color and further destabilization of neighborhoods.

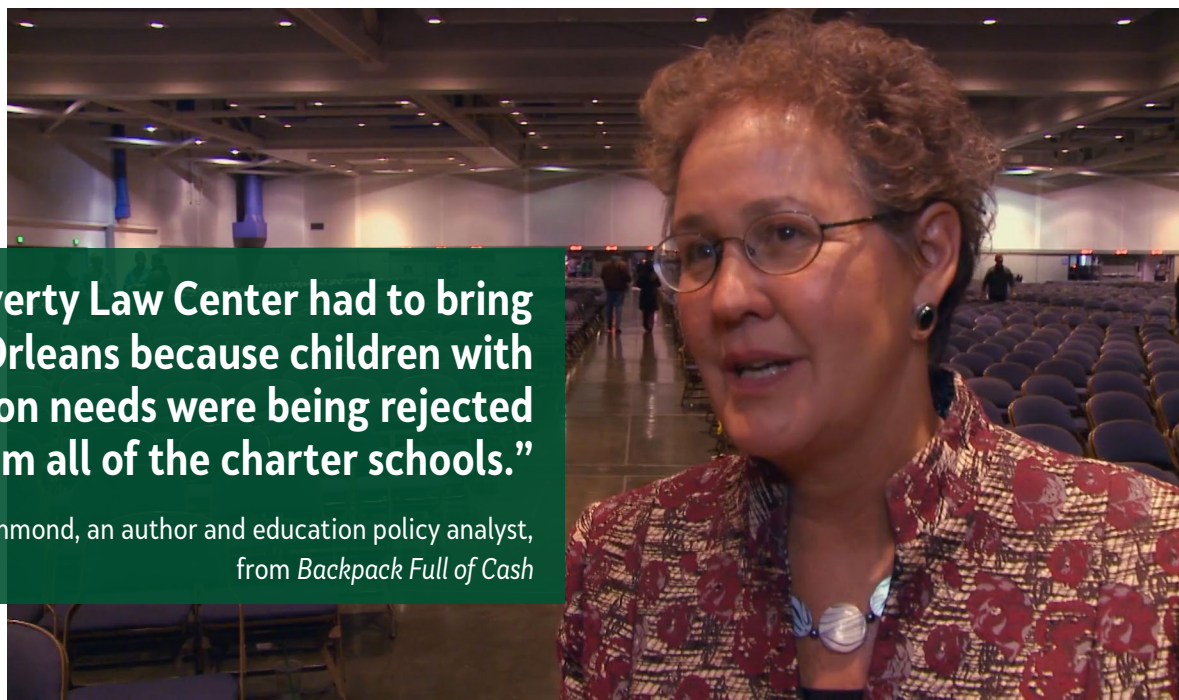
Discussion Questions

Mastery, a “no excuses” charter chain based in Philadelphia and mainly serving students of color, allows disciplinary actions if students “roll their eyes,” “suck their teeth,” or have an “untucked shirt.” What did you think when you saw this in *Backpack Full of Cash*? Do suburban schools have similar policies?

Rhonda Brownstein of the Education Law Center notes in *Backpack Full of Cash* that you don't see a lot of charter schools in wealthy white communities. Why not?

“The Southern Poverty Law Center had to bring a lawsuit in New Orleans because children with special education needs were being rejected from all of the charter schools.”

—Linda Darling-Hammond, an author and education policy analyst, from *Backpack Full of Cash*



History of Voucher Schools

In *Backpack Full of Cash*, Steve Monaghan, the former president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, worries that unless public education is valued, “communities will continue to fracture. Then America becomes Babel. ... We don’t know each other, we become more suspicious of each other. That America becomes a totally different place.”

Concerns about the educational fracturing of America are perhaps most apparent in voucher programs that provide public dollars to directly pay the tuition at private schools, including religious schools. The private schools receiving these tuition vouchers are referred to as “voucher schools.” There are also closely related programs that fund private schools via tax initiatives (see pages 9-10).

The voucher movement can be traced to economist Milton Friedman of the University of Chicago. In 1955, he called for eliminating the funding of public schools and replacing it with universal vouchers that, like food stamps, would be a subsidy. Wealthier families would add to that subsidy so their children could attend expensive private schools. Regulation would be minimal, on par with health inspection at restaurants. Like some conservatives today, Friedman viewed public schools as socialistic and referred to them as “government schools.”

The first use of vouchers was by white families after the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision. For five years, until federal courts intervened, officials closed the public schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia, rather than desegregate. White parents took advantage of vouchers to send their children to a private, whites-only academy.

Such an association between vouchers and white supremacy set back Friedman’s dream. In the late 1980s, however, vouchers were repackaged as “choice,” in particular for low-

income Black students. The first contemporary voucher school program began in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1990. Advocates presented it as a modest program—publicly funded tuition for 300 low-income students in seven private schools.

The Milwaukee program became a beachhead to advance Friedman’s vision. Today, there are [25 voucher school programs](#) in 14 states and the District of Columbia that directly use public dollars to pay the tuition at private voucher schools. Specifics vary, but in general the voucher money is taken out of public funding that otherwise would go to the local public school district.

Discussion Questions

Josh LeSage, headmaster at the Hosanna Christian Academy in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, says in *Backpack Full of Cash* that he tells his students, “You have a Heavenly Father. He loves you. You didn’t come from a piece of slime. You didn’t evolve from an ape.”

Do you think public dollars should fund a religious education at odds with teaching science?

The narrator in *Backpack Full of Cash* says that vouchers “are the most controversial school reform of all.” Why might he say that? Do you agree?

“There are textbooks being used in schools that receive state taxpayer dollars that purport that men and women and dinosaurs gathered together at the same time, at the same place.”

—Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers,
from *Backpack Full of Cash*

Know Your Rights

Josh LeSage is the former headmaster at the Hosanna Christian Academy in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where about half the students receive a publicly funded voucher. LeSage states openly in *Backpack Full of Cash* that the school teaches that the theory of evolution is not true, and that corporal punishment is allowed because “the Bible says at Proverbs that spanking a child won’t kill him, you know, if you do it right.”

Basing the curriculum on the Bible is not the only way in which private voucher schools may differ from public schools.

Voucher schools are defined as private even if they rely on public tax dollars. What this means is that in a wide range of areas, they do not have to follow the same rules as public schools.

For instance, private schools do not have to follow the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal law protecting the rights of students with special education needs. Private schools can also sidestep basic constitutional rights for all students, from free speech to due process when a student is expelled or asked not to return the following year. Overall, from discipline policy to curriculum, parents do not have the legal right to challenge school decisions.

In the privatized education marketplace, one warning is essential: Know your rights.

Does your child’s school protect the rights of LGBTQ students? Provide bilingual or English language services? Educate homeless children or students who move a lot? Provide for parent input in school policies? In all these areas, legal rights differ significantly in public and private schools.

Most public school districts are run by democratically elected school boards. All must follow state and federal educational laws. The many things that one takes for granted with public schools—that teachers are licensed, that the school is accredited, that students cannot be arbitrarily kicked out—do not automatically apply in a private school.

When it comes to charter schools, defined as public but privately run, it’s complicated. Charter schools must follow federal regulations such as providing special education services. But charter school regulations are made at the state level and vary significantly. Georgia, for instance,



“El idioma es un problema para mí porque yo no hablo inglés. Entonces, yo no puedo llenar todo el papeleo para poder meterlo a un charter school.”

The language is a problem for me because I don’t speak English. So I can’t fill out all the paperwork to be able to put him into a charter school.

—Olivia Ponce, the mother of Boris,
from *Backpack Full of Cash*

allows charter schools to request blanket waivers from state and local regulations.

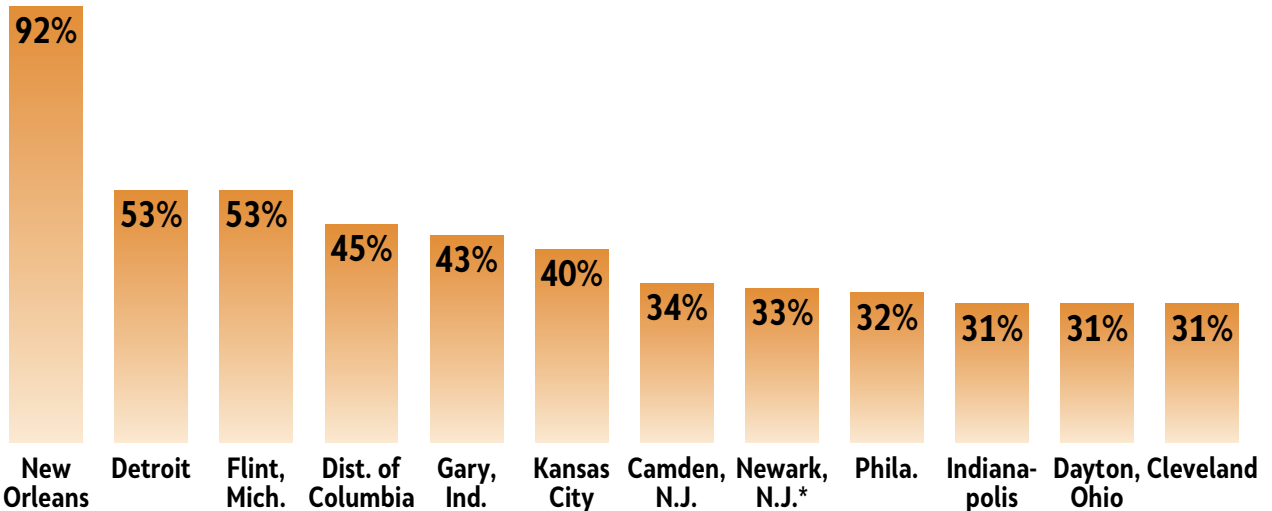
Even in areas such as due process, charter school requirements can be murky. Court decisions have been mixed, and the National Labor Relations Board in Chicago ruled that when it comes to labor laws, charters are private operations. The U.S. Census Bureau, meanwhile, explicitly says that most charter schools do not meet its definition of public and [are considered private](#), unless controlled by another public government entity such as a school district.

Discussion Questions

What are the state laws governing charter and private schools where you live? How do they differ from the regulations and rights in your district’s public schools? Is such information easily available to the public?

Charter School Growth in Urban Areas

Districts with Highest Share of Students in Charter Schools, 2015-16



*Newark is on track to reach 38% by 2018-19 under already approved expansions.

Source: "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter Public School Communities and Their Impact on Student Outcomes." National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Nov. 3, 2016.

In *Backpack Full of Cash*, Philadelphia provides a compelling example of how the growth in charter schools affects the public school district. The graph above highlights how this phenomenon is being repeated across the country, especially in large urban districts serving predominantly students of color.

Some cities—in particular Milwaukee, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.—face the combined effect of both charter schools and private voucher schools. In Milwaukee, for instance, about 40 percent of city students attend a charter or voucher school.

Discussion Questions

Helen Gym, of Parents United for Public Education, notes in *Backpack Full of Cash*, "In the Philadelphia public schools you have got one nurse per fifteen hundred students. And then you contrast that with the enormous investment in specific charter schools and it raises a lot of questions." (In 2016 Gym was elected to the Philadelphia City Council.)

What might be some of the questions that Gym refers to? Do you think the public is aware of the growth of charter schools in major urban areas at the same time traditional schools are being closed? If not, why not?

The Many Forms of Privatization

Backpack Full of Cash highlights how privatization has affected two urban districts—Philadelphia and New Orleans. But similar [programs are proliferating](#) throughout the country. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia allow charter schools, while 28 states have 61 different programs that directly or indirectly fund private schools, most of which are religious. Some cities, such as Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, Cleveland, and New Orleans, have both charter and voucher schools.

This groundbreaking shift is the result of a well-funded and powerful privatization movement. Although dominated by Republicans, it is a bipartisan movement. It includes foundations, think tanks, free-market ideologues, conservative organizations, corporate groups, and billionaires. It ranges from political operatives in the Republican Party, to Democrats for Education Reform, to the American Legislative Exchange Council, which promotes pro-corporate template laws for state legislatures.

Under the administration of Donald Trump and of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, privatization efforts are expected to balloon. DeVos, in particular, has aggressively pushed for giving public money to private religious schools and to for-profit charters (80 percent of the charters in her home state of Michigan are for-profit).

School privatization refers to privately run charter schools, and to voucher programs for private schools. There are a range of voucher and voucher-like programs for private schools. They include:

- **Tuition vouchers.** Often known as “parental choice scholarships” or “opportunity scholarships.” In such programs, the public pays for vouchers that are used to pay the tuition at private schools. The name “voucher school” refers to private schools that accept such publicly funded vouchers. In 2002, a challenge to a tuition voucher program in Cleveland was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, which declared the program constitutional (see page 20). In some programs, every single

student at the private school can be receiving a publicly funded voucher, and yet the school can define itself as private.

Today, there are tuition voucher programs paying student tuition in [14 states and the District of Columbia](#). The programs vary. Some are focused on low-income students; others have loose income requirements. Some target students with special education needs. A few target students leaving public schools. Some pay the full tuition, but most pay partial tuition. According to the pro-privatization organization [EdChoice](#), nearly 180,000 students directly received taxpayer-funded private school tuition vouchers in 2017.

- **Education Savings Accounts (ESA).** A relatively new program, [ESAs](#) allow parents to withdraw their children from a public school or charter school and receive the taxpayer money that would have otherwise gone to the public school. Under an Arizona ESA law passed in April 2017 for example, parents can use that money to pay for private school tuition, home-schooling costs, or for special education services. All families are eligible. Nevada has a similar program. In Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee, the ESAs apply to students with special needs.
- **Individual tax credits and tax deductions.** [These programs](#) provide a state or federal income tax credit for private school expenses, including tuition. In some states, these initiatives are a tax credit; in others it is a tax deduction. *(continued on p.10)*



(Tax credits allow a dollar-for-dollar reduction in your income tax. Tax deductions lower your taxable income.) In 2017, these tax savings benefitted the families of 882,000 students in eight states. The tax initiatives often operate under the political radar because money is not shifted from public to private schools in the state or federal budget. But tax revenue is reduced, leaving less money for public education.

- **Tax-credit scholarships.** [These programs](#) allow businesses and individuals to take a tax credit for donating to private, non-profit organizations that provide vouchers to pay the tuition at a private school. In 2017, 17 states had a total of 256,784 students in these programs. These benefits overwhelmingly go to wealthy individuals or businesses.

Special Note: Children with Special Needs

Among the four categories of privatization programs described above, there are 24 specific programs that target students with special needs. In all of the programs, students enrolling in a private school give up their right to federal protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. On the other hand, all public schools must adhere to the law, which requires schools to develop and implement Individualized Education Programs for students, to hire teachers who are licensed in special education, and to grant parents due process in disciplinary matters.

Discussion Questions

Backpack Full of Cash shows an employment application at a Louisiana voucher school. The application asks: “If you are unmarried, are you abstaining from sexual activity? Do you live with a non-relative of the opposite sex? Do you engage in homosexual activities?” Should private voucher schools be allowed to base their hiring decisions on such questions? How do such questions differ from anti-discrimination guidelines that public schools must follow?

“It’s time to organize, agitate, and demonstrate.
... History will judge us by what we do now.”

—Diane Ravitch, educational historian,
from *Backpack Full of Cash*



Public Schools and the Fight for Civil Rights

The most enduring battle within public education in the last half century has centered on fulfilling the promise of educational opportunity for all students, in particular African American and Latino students.

For much of the 20th Century, African Americans were denied equal opportunity under the Jim Crow-era rationalization of “separate but equal” schools. In its groundbreaking decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court declared Jim Crow schooling unconstitutional.

The unanimous decision also underscored the relationship between public education and democracy, noting that “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.”

Despite the widespread white resistance that greeted the decision, and reliance on policies that forced African Americans to disproportionately bear the burdens of desegregation, progress was undeniable. Not only did high school enrollment and graduation rates increase for African Americans, some of the most significant gains in closing the achievement gap between whites and African Americans occurred during the desegregation era.

Other legal victories followed *Brown*. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in support of students who do not speak English as their first language. In 1982, the court upheld the right of undocumented children to attend public schools.

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, meanwhile, led to major advances in women’s sports and equality for women in school. In 1975, the rights of students with special education needs were codified in federal legislation now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

In recent years, the rights of LGBTQ students have come to the fore. Under President Barack Obama’s administration, the Departments of Education and Justice directed public schools to accommodate transgender students. The Trump administration has rescinded those guidelines.

With this country’s overall retreat from civil rights in recent decades, the U.S. Supreme Court also has shifted course. In a 5-4 decision in 2007, for instance, it overturned desegregation plans in Seattle, Washington, and in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Referring to *Brown*, the minority dissent noted that the ruling “rewrites the history of one of this court’s most important decisions.”

Privatization forces took advantage of the shifting climate and soon dominated discussions on improving academic achievement. That may be changing. As *Backpack Full of Cash* demonstrates, communities of color have been active in opposing the closing of traditional public schools. Last year, the NAACP called for a moratorium on charter schools. The Black Lives Matter platform specifically critiques school privatization, and immigrant rights movements are working with public school districts to protect undocumented students and their families.

Discussion Questions

Philadelphia principal Otis Hackney notes in *Backpack Full of Cash* that there are 19 different languages spoken in his school. What are some of the issues immigrant students face? How do immigrants’ rights issues show up in your community’s schools?

***Backpack Full of Cash* shows a number of protests following the nomination of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education. Why did people react negatively to DeVos’s nomination? What might this say about the public’s support for public education?**

Funding: Money Matters

“We have 3 elevators, the last of which stopped working about a month ago. And the school district said, we don’t have money to fix it right now. To me it’s just like this sort of perfect metaphor for what’s going on. There’s a lot of broken elevators in the system right now and there’s no money to fix them.”

—Dr. Mark Wilkens, social studies teacher at South Philadelphia High, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

The details of school funding are complicated. But the heart of the matter is simple: Our schools don’t get enough funding and the money they do get is not distributed fairly.

Schools with more poor students, more students of color, and more students with language and/or special education needs are the very schools that often get less funding than their counterparts in more affluent suburbs.

Many states, including Pennsylvania, North Dakota, New York, and Illinois, have “regressive” school funding. They provide *less* funding to school districts with higher concentrations of students in poverty.

State and local governments are responsible for 90 percent of public school funding, with federal dollars accounting for the rest. This mix typically [does not provide a solid foundation](#) for high-quality education for all children, and the over-reliance on local property taxes leads to funding inequities among urban and suburban and rural districts.

As Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University notes in *Backpack Full of Cash*, “No civilized country in the world” other than the United States funds its schools via local property taxes or allows such inequality to exist across schools serving different children.

In addition, school-funding problems got worse as a result of the recent recession. *Backpack Full of Cash* cites a 2016 report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities stating that at least 23 states provide less funding per student than before the 2008 recession.

In 35 states, total state [education funding was lower](#) in 2014 than 2008. In 20 states the reduction was more than 10 percent. At the same time, since 2008 the number of school staff has been reduced by more than 220,000 while the number of students has grown by over 1.1 million. That means larger class sizes, fewer support services, and more program cuts.

Discussion Questions

Baruch Kintisch of the Education Law Center says in *Backpack Full of Cash*, “When people say that money doesn’t matter, when they say that we’re spending too much, what I hear them saying is that to them, children in poverty don’t matter. To them, children with disabilities in these poor communities don’t matter. Children from immigrant families who are learning English don’t matter.”

Do you agree or disagree? Why?

How is your school district funded? Are there schools or school districts in your area that have less money? Is it fair to label some students and schools as “failures” when funding is inequitable?



Vigil in Philadelphia in 2013, when a sixth-grader died from an asthma attack after being sent home from a school that did not have a nurse on duty. Due to budget cuts, thousands of employees had been laid off, including nurses.

Photo by Katrina Ohstrom

Standardized Testing

“How is my child doing?” is the most frequent question a parent asks a teacher. “How are our schools doing?” is an equally common question from community members.

Both are important questions. But too often our public schools rely on fill-in-the-blank standardized tests to provide the answer.

Research shows that the misuse of standardized tests distorts student learning, exacerbates inequities for low-income students and students of color, and undermines true accountability.

Students in the United States have historically been among the most “tested” in the world. But with President Bush’s No Child Left Behind and President Obama’s Race to the Top, standardized testing reached a fever pitch. The consequences have been disastrous.

Standardized test scores are used to close schools, fire staff, and narrow the curriculum. Some schools talk more about “data” than children, creating a school culture of competition and punishment instead of compassion and support.

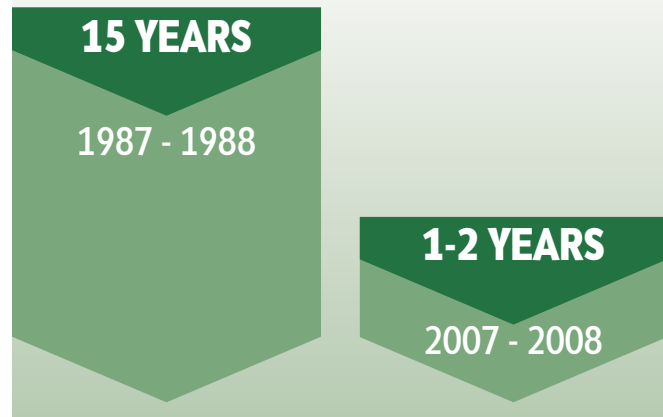
Teachers are pressured to drill students for tests, and students are encouraged to think there is only one “correct” answer. Entire subject areas—such as music, art, social studies, physical education, and second languages—are deemphasized. When students don’t reach desired and arbitrary benchmarks, teachers and schools are blamed and sometimes punished.

As Jennifer Eilender, a Tennessee teacher, notes in *Backpack Full of Cash*: “We have actually had administrators in our county tell us, ‘If it’s not tested, don’t waste your time teaching it. If it’s not tested, don’t teach it.’ And I think that’s sad.”

The premise of “test and punish” school reform is that teachers and students just need to knuckle down and work harder. But the scores reflect the poverty and inequality that surround our schools. Saying “poverty is no excuse” can sometimes be an excuse to do little about broader educational, economic, and healthcare issues.

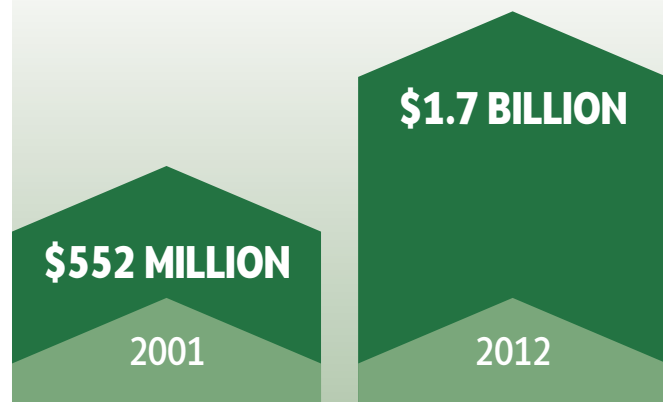
Across the country, resistance to over-testing is growing. Parents are opting their children out of tests, high school students have organized boycotts, and teachers, principals, and superintendents are calling for a sharp reduction in tests. Testing certainly has a role in learning and accountability. But we cannot test our way to equity and excellence for all our children.

EXPERIENCE LEVEL OF THE TYPICAL U.S. TEACHER:



Source: National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2010

STATE SPENDING ON STANDARDIZED TESTS:



Source: Brown Center on Education Policy, 2012

“My daughter, when she was in third grade, spent 30 days just taking standardized tests.”

—Amy Frogge, Nashville parent and school board member, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

Discussion Questions

Barbara Frazier, principal of Gower Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee, notes in the film: “We start off the year testing, we have testing in the middle of the year, and we have testing at the end of the year. ... So sometimes it just seems like all we do is assess.”

How much standardized testing goes on in your local schools? What are other ways to evaluate a school or a student?

Attacks on the Public Sector

The very word “public” is under attack, too often used as a euphemism for “poor,” or “less desirable,” or “those people.”

But the concept of “public” is rooted in democracy and concern for the common good. What are the rights of all citizens? How do we guarantee basic services for all?

Public schools are part of the broader public sector that includes police and fire services, veterans’ programs, Social Security, mass transit, roads and highways, sewage treatment, parks, and much of the land in the country. “Public” services can be viewed as part of a broader “commons,” which includes everything from the air we breathe to the water we drink, and even the languages we speak.

Public institutions, spaces, and programs are “owned” by the public and overseen by democratically elected bodies. The public sector is the main way the government promotes the “general welfare,” which under the U.S. Constitution is a key function of government.

When we replace “public” with “privatized,” we privilege profits over people and undermine public transparency and oversight—whether it’s the schools of Philadelphia or the water supply in Flint, Michigan.

It shouldn’t be surprising that public schools have come under particular attack, given historical trends. In 2014, students of color for the first time [constituted a majority](#) of the students in public schools. This demographic shift is a significant change from the 1950s, which is often seen as a golden era of public education, despite the Jim Crow system of segregated and inferior schools. The attack on

public schools also fuels a larger anti-public institution movement: If we privatize our public schools, a core institution will be decimated, thus making it easier to undermine other public services.

Women and people of color are especially affected by attacks on the public sector, since they constitute a [disproportionately large share](#) of state and local public-sector workers. Some 76 percent of public school teachers [are women](#).

Attacks on public sector unions go hand-in-hand with undermining the public sector. The attacks are promoted as controlling salaries and benefits, but tend to be highly partisan. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, in particular, are among the most organized groups supporting the Democratic Party. They have strongly supported not only public institutions but also progressive social legislation.

Discussion Questions

Backpack Full of Cash argues that, “Central to the reform agenda is an effort to weaken the power of teacher unions, which represent almost 4 million members across the country.” Why might supporters of privatization also try to weaken teacher unions? What role do teachers and teacher unions play in supporting public education?



“Philadelphia has the highest poverty rate of the largest U.S. cities. We’ve got children who suffer from Third World problems—starvation and hunger for example. ... And they deserve to come into a system and an institution that is the absolute best that we can give them.”

—Helen Gym, Philadelphia parent and activist, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

The Public Schools Our Children Deserve

Some of the strongest supporters of public education are also harsh critics. They recognize that public schools need to improve, and that the best defense against privatization is high-quality public schools for all.

In *Backpack Full of Cash* we learn how Union City, New Jersey, confronts many of the same problems as other low-income urban communities. But as David Kirp notes in the film, Union City “has no vouchers or charter schools or anything of the sort. What they’ve done is build a good urban public school system.”

The district implemented research-based programs throughout district schools, programs such as universal high-quality pre-K, smaller class sizes, and a focus on early literacy. Teachers were included as partners, not targeted as the source of the problems. Union City was aided by state court decisions that provided additional funding for districts with a high percentage of students living in poverty. Overall, New Jersey has made some of the [best progress in the nation](#) in narrowing achievement gaps.

Union City is not alone in focusing on its public schools instead of turning to privatization. Across the country, coalitions are developing local strategies to replicate best practices and expand the number of high-quality schools. These efforts vary, but include stakeholders ranging from community organizations to student groups, teacher unions, and school board members.

Some districts are embracing the model of “community schools.” Others are focused on proven models of integration that help reduce the concentrated poverty and racial segregation that remain a central problem in public education. Some are organizing networks to advocate for specific policies, such as increased art and music, smaller class sizes, and a culturally relevant curriculum.

Community Schools: Greenhouses of Democracy

Across the country, public school advocates are increasingly embracing the model of “community schools” as an alternative to privatization. Such schools are seen as community anchors. They draw community resources, parents, and educators together to provide a high-quality public education, and in turn become a stabilizing force in the neighborhood.

“When I think of a vibrant high school, I think of bringing everyone together and then giving everyone the same opportunity. That is the dream of the public school.”

—Pierre LaRocco, guidance counselor,
South Philadelphia High, from *Backpack Full of Cash*

According to the Coalition for Community Schools, more than 100 [communities](#) have embraced the concept and there are now about 7,500 community schools. Districts such as Cincinnati, Ohio, and Oakland, California, are examples.

Initially, community schools were identified almost exclusively with wrap-around social services and after-school programs. That vision has expanded to include other key features:

- An engaging, culturally relevant curriculum that goes beyond test prep, and that connects to students’ lives and teaches respect for all cultures and groups, and equips students to question social inequality of all kinds.
- An emphasis on professional development and high-quality teaching.
- An approach to discipline that relies on restorative practices and resolving conflicts, rather than suspending or punishing students.
- Significant parent and community engagement—ideally with a full-time community school coordinator.
- Shared leadership so school decisions are made collaboratively with staff, parents and, in high schools, students.

Integrating Schools Racially and Socio-economically

Montgomery County, Maryland, [has shown](#) that students from public housing who attend schools with more socio-economic diversity and lower concentrations of poverty

(continued on p.16)

significantly improve their academic performance compared to comparable students attending higher-poverty schools.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, for more than a decade, reform was based on integrating the city’s struggling schools with schools in surrounding Wake County. Theme-based and magnet programs were improved throughout the district and the concentration of free/reduced-price lunch students at any one school was capped at 40 percent. The plan led to some of the nation’s best [progress on closing gaps](#) in achievement and opportunity—until recent rounds of market-driven school reform began to undermine these efforts.

Yet despite the promise of these examples, both the courts and federal government have retreated from the promises of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Most recently, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos eliminated one of the few remaining federal programs promoting school integration, a \$12 million grant program called “Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities.” At the same time, she is pledging a multi-billion dollar federal initiative to promote private school vouchers and charter schools.

Proven practices

In several communities—from [Los Angeles](#) to [Chicago](#) to [Milwaukee](#) to the state of [Hawaii](#)—teacher unions and union-community coalitions have issued reports on “the schools and communities our children deserve.” Such reports were based on local discussions, but included examples of promising practices from across the country. Some also specifically note the importance of promoting community-wide healthcare and economic development.

In addition to promoting concepts such as community schools, the reports highlighted specific reforms with records of success. They include:

- Smaller class sizes, especially in the early grades.
- High-quality early childhood programs beginning at 3-year-old Pre-K.
- Better teacher preparation and support, including expanded mentoring and professional development.
- Culturally relevant curriculum and discipline policies that explicitly oppose all forms of discrimination and end “zero tolerance” policies that help feed the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Curriculum that reduces the amount of standardized testing and instead “teaches the whole child.” Such curriculum practices include: Active, project-based learning, librarians, and art, music, and physical education teachers at all schools.

Discussion Questions

Envision the kind of school you would like your child to attend. What would it look like?

What are one or two changes you would like to see that would improve public education, whether in your school or throughout the district?



Frequently Asked Questions: Charters, Vouchers, and Public Schools

There are so many issues. What's most important?

Each school and district faces unique challenges. But ever since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the central question has been: How does this country confront our educational inequalities and provide equal opportunity for all?

It's not that our society doesn't know how to teach children, but that we do so unequally. It's not that we don't have good schools, but that they are clustered in affluent, predominantly white communities. It's not that we refuse to spend money on children, but that it is disproportionately spent on the already privileged.

Do we promote individualized choices that treat education as a consumer item, which in the long run will lower educational quality for schools and students that are struggling and thus deepen inequity? Or do we, as a society, commit to resolving our inequalities and to providing sufficient resources so that all children can attend high-quality public schools?

Why does the media keep saying our schools are "failing"?

Many of our schools face serious problems, especially in low-income communities of color. But in general, public schools in the United States are not "failing." In this era of alternative facts, we need to critically evaluate claims in both traditional and social media.

As one expert in the film notes, test scores are the highest ever for U.S. students, including Black and Latino students. Dropout rates are the lowest ever. Graduation rates are rising. Even in so-called failing schools and districts, there are exemplary teachers and schools. Even in so-called successful schools and districts, there are problematic teachers and schools.

A quarter century ago, reform focused on improving rather than labeling schools, and emphasized issues such as smaller class sizes, adequate and equitable funding, teacher experience, and a multicultural curriculum. The term "failing schools" was all but non-existent.

After the No Child Left Behind initiative of President George W. Bush, the term "failing schools" became especially popular, and was disproportionately applied to urban schools. The term was repeated so often that, before long, it became accepted truth. Privatizers then used the concept of "failing schools" to argue for charters and vouchers, especially in urban school systems.

Why focus on privatization? Shouldn't we focus on improving public schools?

We need to improve public schools, particularly to address the racial and economic inequities. But the philosophy of school privatization, which funnels public dollars into privately run schools, increasingly dominates policy initiatives.



The appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, a fierce advocate of charters and vouchers, is a prime example.

Public schools need to be better, but if we do not defeat privatization—if our education system turns into nothing more than a “backpack full of cash” following each child—there may not be a public school system left to improve.

But still, our system of public education seems broken. Why not replace it?

Public schools have long been considered one of our democracy’s most vital institutions. That is why every state constitution guarantees the right to a free and public education for all children, a guarantee not afforded other basics such as housing, healthcare, or adequate food and water. It’s also noteworthy that most Americans say their local school and teachers are doing a good job, although they worry about the institution of public education overall.

Many of our democratic institutions appear broken—we face an erosion of voting rights, undue influence of money in politics, and extreme partisanship in our legislative bodies. But the task is to strengthen our democratic institutions, not abandon them.

As we talk of the various merits of public schools versus privatized solutions, keep in mind: Public school districts are the only institution in this country with the capacity, the commitment, and the legal obligation to educate all children.

Even if they are not “failing,” public schools are not models of equity. Why let them off the hook?

We agree. But the solution is not to follow the pressures of a marketplace ideology and encourage islands of consumer privilege within a sea of inequity.

We can’t idealize our system of public schools. Too often, public schools are complicit in bolstering this country’s divisions between the “haves” and “have-nots.” While privatization of our public schools exacerbates problems of inequality, that doesn’t mean we can ignore problems within traditional public schools. We must never abandon

the goal of equal educational opportunity for all, and must fight inequities wherever they occur.

At the same time, we must also defend the institution of public education. For all its flaws, public education is perhaps the most democratic of our institutions. It has done far more to address inequality, offer hope, and provide opportunity than the country’s financial, economic, and political institutions. In the end, governmental oversight is still the only way to demand and help ensure educational equity.

We live in a capitalist country. Why not look to the free market for solutions?

Public schools certainly must follow sound financial practices and carefully spend their money. But as every parent knows, each child is unique. Schools are not factories. Churning out assembly-line widgets or relying on rote, computer-based learning is not the same as helping each child reach their potential both as a student and as a human being. What’s more, the marketplace inherently favors people with more money. Rich people can buy steak; poor people buy hamburger.

As Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, notes: “I’ve never in my entire life seen any evidence that the competitive free market, unrestricted, without a strong counterpoise within the public sector, will ever dispense decent medical care, sanitation, transportation or education to the people. It’s as simple as that.”

Some people argue that the real problem is segregated housing. Most children attend a public school in the neighborhood where they live.

Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are central problems in public education. But the courts and legislatures have made integrating U.S. schools, either racially or socio-economically, much harder in recent years.

The No Child Left Behind law also marked a dramatic change in federal education policy—away from its historic role of promoting access and equity, to establishing mandates promoting testing, charters, and privatization.

Some of the most significant gains in closing the achievement

gap between whites and African Americans occurred as a result of desegregation. Yet in recent decades the courts have backed away from enforcing desegregation and many of the most promising efforts to promote integration and disperse concentrated poverty have faded. Reviving and expanding such initiatives should be a high priority for new school reform proposals.

Some charter schools are diverse and innovative. Isn't that good?

There is no one type of charter school, and some remain faithful to the original vision of charter school innovation, transparency, and collaboration with public schools. But increasingly, these schools are the exception. As the Civil Rights Project at the University of California-Los Angeles [notes](#), “Though there are some remarkable and diverse charter schools, most are neither.”

The charter school *movement*, meanwhile, has aligned itself with a privatization philosophy that seeks to limit public accountability and transparency, that is not committed to serving all children, that reduces the role of families to individual consumers, and that diverts public dollars into privately run schools. It is this well-funded *movement* that is steering the national charter school discussion.

In addition, charter schools [tend to be hyper-segregated](#), facilitating rather than challenging our society's return to educational apartheid.

If a school is educating a child, whether it's a private school or a charter school, doesn't it deserve public dollars?

Lack of adequate resources is one of the key problems facing public schools, particularly in low-income rural and urban communities. Voucher schemes and privately run charters make this problem worse.

Politicians rarely, if ever, talk about using charters or vouchers to increase the amount of money

devoted to education. They are merely shifting money from public schools to privately run schools.

There is also the issue of public transparency and responsibility. The problem is especially acute in voucher schools, which are defined as “private” even if every single student is receiving a publicly funded voucher.

The public has few if any rights to know how their tax dollars are being spent at a private school. In essence, voucher schools are taxation without representation.

Affluent white people get to go to private schools. Don't vouchers help poor students have the same chance?

In its early years, voucher advocates focused on low-income students, knowing that this was politically popular. But as the voucher movement has gained strength, it has expanded to include programs that provide tuition or tax benefits to middle-income or rich families.

Wisconsin, for instance, started the first contemporary voucher program in Milwaukee in 1990, and it served 300 low-income students. Today, Wisconsin has five different voucher schemes—including one that provides up to \$10,000 per child in tax deductions for all families, even billionaires.

It's also important to remember that private schools can selectively serve students. Private voucher schools do not have to provide the same level of special education services, educate homeless children, provide bilingual language



programs, or respect constitutional rights such as free speech or due process.

In the end, it's the private school that chooses. It is the private school that decides which students to encourage to apply, which students to keep, which students to "counsel out," which students to expel.

It's no mere coincidence that the term "private" is often followed by the phrase, "Keep Out!" Private schools, like private roads and private country clubs, don't have to answer to the public. That's why they are called "private."

But what about charter schools? Aren't they considered public?

Charter schools are publicly funded but often privately run. For-profit charter schools, in particular, increasingly argue they are private operators and can thus sidestep basic accountability requirements. They also have more leeway than traditional public schools to suspend, expel, or counsel out students.

Some charter schools aggressively push out students they deem undesirable. The Harlem Children's Zone, which has been a darling of the charter movement, once kicked out an entire class of middle school students because of their low test scores.

When students are expelled from charter or private schools, it becomes the responsibility of the public school district to educate the child. In this regard, public schools are this country's educational "home": the place where, when you knock on the door, they have to let you in.

I'm a parent. Why shouldn't I send my child to a charter or voucher school if it's a better fit?

We would never fault any parent who makes such a decision. Raising kids is hard, and parents do what parents are expected to do: They advocate for their child.

But policymakers have a different job. It is their responsibility to develop policies that balance competing interests and do what's best for all children.

We must resist public policies that privilege the choices of some parents while limiting the choices of others. The most heart-wrenching example, overturned by the *Brown* decision, was the system of Jim Crow schools in which the

choices of white parents kept African American students in segregated and inferior schools.

We have choices in other areas of life. Why not in schools?

A concept as American as apple pie, individual choice has long been considered a component of liberty. In education, used appropriately, it can—and should—help ensure that public schools are sensitive to the varying needs of students, families, and communities.

Following the *Brown* decision, magnet schools, citywide specialty schools, and other forms of public school choice helped implement a collective responsibility to desegregate our schools and promote equal educational opportunity.

But just as the term "states' rights" was code in the 1960s for opposing federal civil rights legislation, today, "choice" has become code language. It is code for initiatives that funnel public tax dollars into private voucher schools or privately run charters. It is code for reforms based on markets and individual decisions by consumers.

Over time, the emphasis on individual, consumer choice has undermined the collective choice for public schools that serve all children.

For these reasons, many public school advocates refuse to use the term "choice" to describe voucher or charter school initiatives.

But don't vouchers help children escape "failing" public schools?

In many programs, the children receiving vouchers did not come from a public school—they were either first entering school or were already attending the private school. Even if the focus is on students in public schools when voucher programs first start, that can easily change.

The overwhelming majority of private schools in this country are religious, as are the majority of voucher schools. Most parents choose a private school for reasons of religion, not academic achievement.

Religion is a profoundly private matter, and people have the right to a private religious education. But that does not mean the public should pay for it—especially when private religious schools promote church doctrine that may be at odds with public policy, for instance that birth control is wrong, or that homosexuality is a sin.

When put to a popular vote, voucher programs have repeatedly been rejected. In Michigan, the home state of Betsy DeVos, voters twice rejected referenda promoted by DeVos, by more than 2-1 margins.

Do tax dollars for religious schools violate the separation of church and state?

In 2002, in a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Cleveland voucher program including religious schools did not violate the federal separation of church and state, in part because parents could choose between various options, making it a private decision.

The decision did not prohibit Cleveland-like voucher programs. But it did not mandate them, leaving such decisions to the states. A majority of state constitutions have a far stronger wall than Ohio when it comes to separating public funding and religious education.

The U.S. Supreme Court debate took place in the context of an increasingly powerful privatization movement, whose rhetoric was accepted as fact. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, for example, wrote in his majority decision that the Cleveland program was an attempt “to provide educational opportunities to the children of a failed school district.”

Some people say that allowing public dollars for private and charter schools is a civil rights issue, and I support civil rights.

Education has long been a focus of movements for racial justice and equal opportunity—from the fight against Jim Crow segregated schools, to educating students with special education needs, protecting the right of undocumented children to attend public schools, defending gender equality, and protecting LGBTQ rights.

These struggles have centered on public schools, which, as public entities, are subject to democratic oversight and must respect basic constitutional rights; this is not the case with private schools.

Forces of privatization have tried to claim the mantle of civil rights, but it has been a tortured argument. Charter and voucher programs ultimately are about limiting the right

to a free and public education, a right enshrined in every state constitution in the country. In addition, charter and voucher schools have exacerbated the return to segregated schooling, further undermining the promise of the *Brown* decision.

Today, civil rights organizations are increasingly defending the right to a public education. The recent platform of the Movement for Black Lives, for instance, takes a strong stand against school privatization. The NAACP, in a resolution passed in the fall of 2016, called for a moratorium on charter school expansion and for strengthening public oversight of charter schools.

Isn't it true that charters and vouchers outperform public schools?

There are high-performing public schools, private schools, and charter schools. But the rhetorical promise of the charter and voucher movements—that they would use free-market principles of choice and competition to spur increased academic achievement for all—has proven false. Overall, studies have shown that voucher and charter schools do not outperform public schools.

We also need to keep in mind that defining academic achievement is too often limited to fill-in-the-blank standardized tests. But researchers have long noted that an over-reliance on standardized tests can distort student learning and exacerbate inequities facing low-income students and students of color.

Relying on high-stakes standardized tests also limits our vision of what is a good education. If you were to describe the ideal school for your child, would standardized tests be at the top of the requirements?

In the end, charters and vouchers are not about improving academic performance. They are about funneling public dollars into privately run schools. As the filmmakers of *Backpack Full of Cash* note, in their five years of making the film, their fundamental concern did not change: Why dismantle our public school system? Instead, why not make it work for every child?

This Q&A was written and produced in August 2017 by Rethinking Schools, Stone Lantern Films, and Turnstone Productions, with project funding from the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Resources

School Privatization

[ALEC Exposed](#) A website dedicated to exposing the American Legislative Exchange Council. Check out their [page on school privatization](#).

[Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools](#) (AROS) An alliance of parent, youth, community, and labor organizations that represent more than 7 million people. Organizes nationwide days of action to reclaim the promise of public education as our nation's gateway to a strong democracy and racial and economic justice.

[American Civil Liberties Union](#) Works to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States.

[American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT) At local and national levels this teachers union works to promote public schools and to stop privatization.

[Alternet Education Page](#) Numerous articles on school privatization from around the country.

[Badass Teachers Association](#) (BATs) A network of over 80,000 teachers and education activists throughout the United States who fight for communities to have strong, sustainable, and well-funded public schools.

[Black Lives Matter's Statement](#) on "An End to the Privatization of Education and Real Community Control"

[Center for Popular Democracy](#) Works with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions to envision and win an innovative pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda. Check out these [education publications](#).

[Economic Policy Institute](#) A nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank created to include the needs of low- and middle-income workers in economic policy discussions. See their "[Exploring the Consequences of Charter School Expansion](#)."

[Education Commission of the States](#) ECS conducts research, delivers reports, and provides expert counsel on the full spectrum of education policy issues—from early learning through postsecondary and workforce readiness.

[Education Law Center of NJ](#) Education Law Center (ELC) serves as a leading voice for New Jersey's public

school children and is one of the most effective advocates for equal educational opportunity and equitable school funding in the United States. See [Is School Funding Fair?](#)

[Education for Liberation](#) National coalition of teachers, community activists, researchers, youth, and parents who believe a good education should teach people—particularly low-income youth and youth of color—how to understand and challenge the injustices their communities face. Organizes "Free Minds Free People" conference.

[In the Public Interest](#) A research and policy center on privatization and responsible contracting. It has issued several reports on dangers of school privatization.

[Journey for Justice \(J4J\)](#) An alliance of grassroots community, youth, and parent-led organizations in 21 cities across the country pushing back and demanding community-driven alternatives to the privatization of public schools systems. See [Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures and Public School Sabotage](#).

[The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) NAACP, the oldest civil rights organization in the United States. The fundamental goal of the NAACP's education advocacy agenda is to provide all students access to quality education. [NAACP Resolution and statement on charter schools](#).

[National Center for Education Statistics](#) Collects data from many sources covering all areas of education. See the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports.

[National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education](#) Provides nonpartisan documentation and analysis of privatization in education.

[National Education Association](#) (NEA) On local, state, and national levels, this teachers union works to improve and defend public schools.

[National Education Policy Center](#) Sponsors research, produces policy briefs, and publishes expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. A great place to find responses to pro-privatization reports.

[National School Board Association](#) NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. It believes "education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people."

[Network for Public Education](#) (NPE) An advocacy group whose mission is to preserve, promote, improve, and strengthen public schools. Check out their “[NPE Toolkit: School Privatization Explained](#).”

[Opportunity to Learn Network](#) A national network working to secure a high-quality public education for all students.

[Parents Across America](#) A grassroots organization that connects parents from around the United States to strengthen and support public schools.

[Parents for Public Schools](#) A non-profit organization of parent leaders who work to improve public schools by educating, engaging, and mobilizing parents across the country.

[Progressive Magazine’s “Public School Shakedown”](#)

[Rethinking Schools](#) Publisher of quarterly magazine and books that oppose school privatization and promote high-quality public schools and teaching for social justice.

[Right to Education Project](#) Tracks international developments in the fight against privatization and promotion of public schools.

[TAG Teachers4SocialJustice](#) A coalition of 10 social justice teacher groups that hold conferences and organize for educational justice in major cities. URLs of local groups listed.

NOTE: The two following organizations promote privatization but have extensive information about voucher and charter programs.

[EdChoice](#) Promotes school privatization. Their annual report *ABCs of School Choice* has comprehensive information on school privatization programs and legislation by state.

[National Charter School Resource Center](#) A pro-charter school clearinghouse that has information on charter school legislation. Their listing of charter schools does not distinguish between those chartered by local school districts (in which employees are public employees) and privately run charter schools.

Community Schools

[Coalition for Community Schools](#) An alliance of national, state, and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government,

and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community school networks.

[National Center for Community Schools](#) The Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools is a practice-based technical assistance organization that builds the capacity of schools, districts, and community partners to organize their human and financial resources around student success.

Standardized Testing Issues

[Defending the Early Years](#) An organization of early childhood educators and advocates who rally educators to take action on policies that impact the education of young children, especially around testing and standards.

[FairTest National Center for Fair and Open Testing](#) Excellent materials in English and Spanish on alternative forms of assessment and problems with standardized testing.

[Learning Policy Institute](#) Works on a range of policy issues, particularly assessment.

[NY Performance Standards Consortium](#) A network of schools using high-quality assessment alternatives to standardized testing.

[Rethinking Schools](#) Articles in their quarterly magazine and on their website critique standardized testing and offer suggestions for authentic forms of assessment. See their book [Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools](#).

Philadelphia-based Groups

[Education Law Center of Pennsylvania](#) The ELC-PA’s mission is to ensure access to a quality public education for all children in Pennsylvania.

[Juntos](#) A community-led, Latinx immigrant organization in South Philadelphia fighting for our human rights as workers, parents, youth, and immigrants.

[Youth United for Change](#) A youth-led, democratic organization made up of youth of color and working-class communities, with the “people” and political power to hold school officials and government accountable to meeting the educational needs of Philadelphia public school students.

[Philadelphia Student Union](#) Runs city-wide campaigns that bring together students from all of their chapters and additional schools to improve school district policies and practices.

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For a downloadable PDF of this guide, and/or a stand-alone version of the Frequently Asked Questions and Resources, visit Rethinking Schools at www.rethinkingschools.org.

For more information on *Backpack Full of Cash* or to host a screening:
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