

Customization Through Free Enterprise

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Traditional public schools do not engage a high percentage of children in useful learning; a broad generalization that I will justify. Because of inattention to the [roots of the problem](#), that sad fact has survived frenzied efforts to improve materials, teachers, and a variety of other factors. Children are too diverse in terms of which instructional approaches and which subject themes will achieve the needed engagement in the learning process for any approach to achieve even acceptable rates of success with children mostly sorted into schools by attendance zone and into classrooms only by age. The public school system tries to address student diversity by creating options within large, mall-like campuses, and sometimes with [ability grouping](#) within classrooms. That has achieved unmanageable school goliaths and student alienation, and stressed teachers, but not improved performance. Efforts to make that approach to student diversity yield acceptable outcomes will continue, but the evidence is overwhelming in volume and urgency ([‘Nation at Risk’](#)) that policymaking needs to pursue engagement of diverse children in other ways.

My non-ideological premise is that an alternative to the present public policy strategy of different options within huge mall-like schools is ‘school choice’ from a menu of diverse schooling options, including choices developed through the [entrepreneurial initiative that drives most of our economy](#).

Consider this example of how that process could work for schooling, and why. Suppose that ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’ gradually notice their son’s excitement and riveted attention during the sports news, and utter disengagement with the rest of the news. Their son is just doing okay in his assigned public school that targets content and examples to generic children. Dad wonders how much better he would do if only his son was in a classroom (or online setting) that taught math through sports stats, taught science through sports examples, and taught reading and writing through sports stories. Mom says there are probably a lot of kids like their son.

They determine that with some entrepreneurial guile and spirit, the sports-stories-themed school idea that would probably bring much better learning outcomes from their son could be highly successful as a chartered public school or as a private school if vouchers, tuition tax credits, or [education savings accounts](#) are available to defray the tuition cost. Private schools struggle to exist and are rare now and mostly church-run because it is very tough to sell schooling when it is available from the government for no additional charge beyond taxes you must pay. The charter option depends on state law (seven states don’t allow chartered public schools, and how tough it is to do so varies widely in the other 43 states), and whether such a school’s per pupil costs would be below the state’s per charter pupil payment.

Note that specialized schooling such as sports-stories-themed schools must be schools of choice. You cannot assign children to specialized instructional

approaches. Many themes or pedagogies that would engage a lot of children would bore/disengage the vast majority.

The sports-stories-themed school is financially feasible if the school can recruit enough children (be their best choice) so that the combination of public funding and private funding, either from charity or family tuition co-payment, is sufficient to finance the delivery of the promised curriculum. Suppose, as a result of talented teachers that love to use sports stories to teach general things like the three r's, and a great location for the school, the school can charge tuition way above the cost of delivering the instruction, and owned by an entrepreneur it charges 'what the market will bear'. The school's profit is a short-term reward for entrepreneurial risk and wisdom, and a magnet for increased investment and competition that will force the tuition price of sports-stories-themed schooling down to the cost achievable by the most efficient schools. That combination of idea-driven enterprise, profit-loss, and price change is what would determine the public-private mix of diverse schooling options on a 'playing field' leveled by tuition tax credits, tuition vouchers, or [education savings accounts](#).