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School Choice and Urban Diversity

Many more middle-class parents would live in big cities if they could pick the schools their kids attend.

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By JOHN NORQUIST

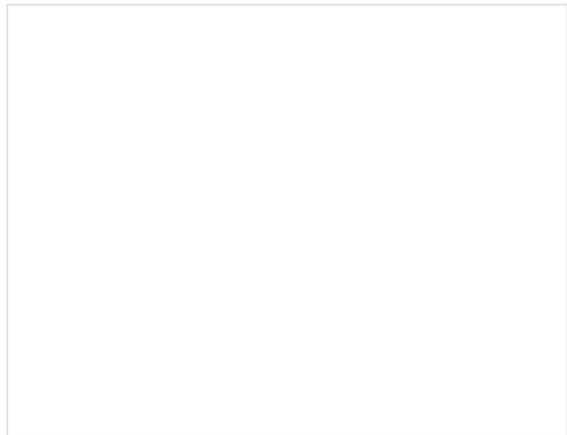
With several new GOP governors taking power, shock if not awe pervades the Midwest, particularly among those of us who are Democratic urban dwellers. Perhaps the wave of corporate tax breaks, service cuts to the needy, and transfer of school aid from poor to wealthy districts will be undone with the next swing of the political pendulum. Yet there is one GOP budget provision in Wisconsin that I hope survives.

For 20 years there's been debate about parental school choice, but only a few places actually have it. Milwaukee has had choice since 1991. At first it was very limited—no religious schools, the program restricted to families with very low incomes, and a cap on total enrollment of 1,000. But parents are now able to choose religious schools, the income limit has been raised to 175% of the federal poverty line (\$39,113), and the cap has increased to 22,500 students.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker has proposed allowing any Milwaukee parent, regardless of income, to enroll their children in private and parochial schools. This will address two problems with the current choice program. One, the cap on total enrollment has forced parents onto waiting lists and into lotteries. Two, the income limit has the effect of isolating low-income students from other more affluent students.

Other jurisdictions, including Florida, Arizona and Cleveland, have choice programs. In Washington, D.C., choice was implemented under President George W. Bush and frozen under President Barack Obama. But Florida's program requires a public school to fail, with failure measured by the state, not by parents. And all choice programs have limitations that undermine the desire of parents to have their children attend a school in which they have confidence. Yet if you think about it, America already has a school choice program in large metro areas. It's a system that segregates the poor from the rich and works against Americans who want to live in cities. Here's how it works.

If a young couple moves to, say, St. Louis and chooses a home in one of the city's revitalizing neighborhoods like Forest Park, everything goes well until their first child approaches school age. They might decide to pay for private education at one of the few such schools in the city. Or they might take a chance on getting into one of the city's elite magnet schools. But what looks like the surest way to enroll their child in a good school is to move to a suburb, such as Webster Grove. The schools there draw



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from a mostly affluent population, have a large tax base behind each child, and are free of charge if you live there.

So although the couple enjoys urban life in St. Louis, they leave for better school opportunities. This process occurs all across the country; many parents with resources move away from cities and suburbs where poor people live.

Some may say that's the natural course of events. But in most provinces of Canada, parents can choose private and religious education with financial assistance from the government. And every nation in Western Europe, including heavily unionized social democracies like the Netherlands and Sweden, has some form of parental school choice.

People with children and money don't cluster outside European or Canadian cities to avoid sending their kids to school with the poor. And the poor who live in cities have the opportunity to attend public, private and parochial schools that are appreciated by a large cross section of parents.

American liberals have been reluctant to embrace school choice, fearing it will drain resources from government-operated schools. Yet isn't it even worse to support a system that rewards concentration of the rich in exclusive suburbs segregated from the poor? Of course there are affluent people (Bill Clinton and Barack Obama come to mind) who enroll their children in urban private schools like D.C.'s Sidwell Friends, which still has some children enrolled from the choice program. Many more, including middle-class parents, would live in economically and racially diverse cities once school choice was universally available.

If expanded, Milwaukee's choice program will demonstrate this to the whole country.

Mr. Norquist was the Democratic mayor of Milwaukee from 1988 to 2004. He is now president of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

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