

A New Selling Point for Universal School Choice Policies

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No U.S. state has adopted school choice policies that would foster the dynamic menu of diverse schooling options that a diverse student population needs. Arguing that school choice expansion would gradually yield large improvements in school system performance has not yet produced transformative policies. While we strengthen that argument, the urgency of our ‘Nation at Risk’ situation demands we seek out other means to persuade governors and legislators. Are there any new arguments available to persuade public officials to take the political risk of making it easier to opt out of assigned traditional public schools? Yes! Indeed, the opportunity to quickly achieve a local-regional economic development jolt through school choice policies may ultimately prove to be the ignition catalyst for Milton Friedman’s “wildfire”; the Friedman assertion that once tried, in earnest, universal choice would spread rapidly. To achieve ignition, some place(s) have to try it, in earnest, and so far we have only small, restriction-laden, escape hatch versions of the transformative programs we need. The immediate economic development effect of school choice expansion is different from the long-run economic development effect of widespread academic gains.

In our assessment of the 1998-2008 [Edgewood Voucher program](#), Nathan Gray and I discovered that an opportunity to achieve free or substantially discounted private schooling by relocating will attract a lot of new residents. In hindsight, duh!!!! It’s the same reason that some homebuyers are willing to pay more for a house in the attendance area of a public school that will work better for their child[ren]. A partial or full discount on private school tuition is very attractive to families that see private schooling options as best for some or all of their children. In the Edgewood part of San Antonio (Texas), where private funds financed vouchers for residents of that

part of San Antonio from 1998-2008, the increased demand for housing and increased population attracted new businesses. Two years into the Edgewood program, a surge in Edgewood District public school performance provided an additional in-migration magnet; better public school performance for children for whom public schools are the best option alongside better access to private schools for children for whom that option is the most attractive.

The 1/3 minimum share of the electorate that votes for school choice expansion may not be enough to change school system governance and funding policies, but just a fraction of that amount willing to relocate to places that level the playing field between public and private schooling options is more than enough to cause major economic development effects. While the Edgewood evidence plus the ‘duh’ factor may be persuasive enough, we may need to document and [publish](#) additional examples of in-migration and development as a result of school choice opportunities before we can effectively use this selling point to overcome political risk aversion to school system transformation. Finding additional examples will be tough given the limited nature of the vast majority of U.S. school choice programs. Maybe foreign programs can provide additional compelling examples, or maybe the difference between the charter laws of nearby states was enough to trigger some migration. We need to investigate. Triggering the Friedman “wildfire” in the way he intended – by demonstrating the academic benefits of increased school choice – will take ten to twenty years beyond the implementation of a large-scale, low-restriction school choice program. We need the potentially faster economic development rationale as the rapid diffusion catalyst. The repeated affirmations of the ‘[Nation at Risk](#)’ outcomes of the current system indicate that school system transformation is urgent; delay is very costly.