

Public School Choice is Not Good Enough: Very Costly with a Low Upside

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A lot of families are not happy with the schooling available through their assigned public school. It may be that the [systemic problems](#) arising from weak incentives to relentlessly improve performance, [out-of-field teaching](#), [unprofessional working conditions](#), [weak and boring politically correct textbooks and curricula](#), and lax discipline have caused the assigned school to become low-performing. Such schools are not good at what they aim to do, which means they are not a good fit for any child. At a national average per child expenditure of ~\$13,000 per year, such schools are gold-plated disasters. There are a lot of those, but I suspect the second reason why some families would benefit from affordable alternatives to the assigned school is more significant than the first. Even if the assigned school is great at what it does, the assigned school's curriculum and pedagogies will not be a good fit for every child.

[“Homeowners’ Quest for the Best Schools”](#) showed how costly it can be to find a better fit within the public school system, even for the families willing and able to exercise public school choice by relocating to a very expensive attendance area. A Houston family found a highly acclaimed school in an Austin suburb. At great cost, they bought access to it. A California family had the resources to switch from a \$1 million house to a \$1.6 million house to buy assignment to a top-ranked school. A New York family moved several times to establish themselves, at great expense and with considerable frenzy, in a highly rated school. All of that, which many families lack the means to do, to move their children – all-or-nothing – from a school with a one-size-fits-all plan to another school with the same wishful thinking. Even the widespread comprehensive uniformity, mega-public-school approaches – something for everyone in a shopping-mall setting - will NOT fit all no matter how proficiently the plan is executed. Schools with attendance areas must attempt to make one size fit all. They cannot specialize in instructional approaches that would work spectacularly well for some children, but badly for others; something that only schools of choice can do.

Furthermore, what is not well known, but [well-documented](#) for several states, is that the “best schools” are not nearly as good as most people think they are. Lance Izumi's [“Not as Good as you Think”](#) series now includes six large states. In each state, the top-performing schools typically still have serious performance problems. In California (2007), not a single school was high-performing. All of the schools fare even worse when you get away from how their state grades them and think in terms of the public schools' ability to engage academically diverse children. For that, the public school authorities preach reliance on [‘differentiated instruction’](#), which is rare because, at worst it is a “failure and a farce,” and at best, it is very difficult in the academically diverse settings created by assigning children to schools and classrooms based just on address and age. Some of the children assigned to the top schools would find a better fit elsewhere.

Families like the ones featured in "[Homeowners' Quest for the Best Schools](#)" should be getting a lot more for their money. Actually, if we had a level playing field between public schools and actual and potential private schools, everyone would get better-fit schooling, with lower school taxes, and no need to uproot their families to do right by their children. The children that stay in their assigned schools would benefit from the more teachable classrooms – less need for [difficult, rare differentiated instruction](#) – created by the departure of the children for whom the public schools' practices were not a good fit, and maybe also some competitive pressures.

A family has an especially serious problem when the assigned public school is a good fit for some of their children, but not all. Public school choice through relocation is all-or-nothing. What to do? Moving to another attendance area to pursue a better fit for the struggling child[ren] could create a poor fit for the appropriately engaged child[ren]. A public-private level playing field – universal public-private school choice without having to relocate – solves that problem.

We need to end our school system's discrimination against families whose assigned public school is not a good fit for all of their children. Some differences in children are valid reasons to provide more public funding for some than others, but differences in who employs their educators is not.