

# Proper Perspective and Realistic Expectations Please: Too Much Expected from Non-Transformational School Choice

John Merrifield  
February 15, 2015

I hate to throw cold water on the widely trumpeted school choice gains around the country. Really, I do! But the short path from unrealistic expectations to policy advocacy abandonment forces a periodic reality check on just how far we have yet to go for a realistic *transformational starting point*. One thing we can say with quite a bit of confidence is that ‘incrementalism’ does not gradually yield universality and school system transformation. Politically feasible, escape hatch programs are useful for the children they help immediately, but they are not part of a systemic reform process. Small scale, targeted school choice expansions do not gradually shed their key restrictions and become transformational, universal choice policies.

The prompt for this latest reality check arose from a panel discussion at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual School Choice and Reform International Academic Conference. A top staffer [of Democrats for Education Reform](#) noted that Arizona ranked first in the School Choice Index of the [Center for Education Reform](#), but 41<sup>st</sup> on one of the National Assessment of Education Progress tests; something he asserted was proof that school choice expansion was a weak education improvement tool. Indeed, the small U.S. programs are producing small effects.

Sadly, after decades of frenzied efforts to achieve noteworthy improvement, and mega-hype of the small positive steps, no state has changed the choices very much. Ranking the differences between the 50 states’ school choice policies is like ranking the freedom levels of the countries behind the Iron Curtain (pre-1989, Eastern Europe). The freest was still not very free. #1, Arizona has very limited school choice options. Arizona’s tuition tax credits are small, and

its path-breaking Education Savings Account program provides small sums just to Special Needs students. Hurray for the participants, but they are a small fraction of the population. Arizona's programs are not nearly transformational. The other states' efforts at school system reform have been equally non-transformational, or even less so. That includes at the metro level, where we have little to show in the way of systemic improvement for the [Milwaukee poster child](#) of the school choice movement.

Above, I highlighted '*transformational starting point*' because even a transformational policy will still take a long time to yield noteworthy school system improvement. Given the urgency of school system improvement, we have to avoid hype of small-scale, restriction-laden programs – seeing them strictly as the escape hatches that they are – and lower our expectations for rates of school system improvement, even for large scale programs. Noteworthy [immediate effects](#) will include economic growth as families move children struggling with traditional public schools that don't work for them relocate to places with a menu of affordable schooling options. Hopefully, documentation of such immediate effects will spread transformational policies faster than the slow-to-be-realized, noteworthy improved schooling outcomes.