

BACKGROUND

No. 3346 | SEPTEMBER 12, 2018

Education Choice and the Success Sequence: Adapted Remarks from The Heritage Foundation's 2017 Antipoverty Forum

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Abstract

School choice is a means to achieving numerous important goals: It fosters upward economic mobility, instills civic values, engenders an appreciation for the arts and humanities, and imparts students with the knowledge and the skills necessary to pursue their life and career goals. Education choice, at its essence, serves as a vehicle through which the individual is able to attain his highest aspirations. How do schools of choice foster these ends? Many model what Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution have called “the success sequence”: graduate high school, get a job, get married, and then have children. As Dr. Brad Wilcox has found, 97 percent of Millennials who follow the success sequence do not end up in poverty once they reach young adulthood. School choice, by enabling families to choose schools that foster the success sequence, provides access to education options that prepare students for all that life may hold, equipping them to be successful in marriage and family formation. Enabling students to choose schools that are the right fit for them prepares them to inherit the blessings and the liberties of a free society.

On November 16, 2017, The Heritage Foundation's Institute for Family, Community, and Opportunity hosted its fifth annual Antipoverty Forum. The Antipoverty Forum brings together policymakers, scholars, and on-the-ground organizations working to combat poverty and to bring change to those who need it most through free-market policies and civil society leadership. The following remarks are adapted from a panel on education reform as an anti-poverty strategy, featuring W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia and the American Enterprise Institute; Derrick Max,

KEY POINTS

- Despite the many federal reform efforts from the mid-20th century forward, and the hundreds of federal programs since President Lyndon Johnson launched the education component of his war on poverty in 1965, academic achievement outcomes have been flat.
- Research has demonstrated that school choice meaningfully improves students' lives beyond K-12: It increases their chances of attending and persisting through college, decreases their chances of being involved in criminal activity, improves their earnings potential, and leads to parents who are more satisfied with their children's educational experiences.
- At its essence, school choice serves as the vehicle through which the individual is able to attain his highest aspirations.
- Many schools of choice also model the “success sequence.” Ninety-seven percent of Millennials who follow the success sequence—graduate high school, get a job, get married, and then have children—do not end up in poverty once they reach young adulthood.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3346>

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Introduction (Lindsey M. Burke)

What do we hope education reform will achieve?

Understandably, many people would answer that question in terms of increased academic performance. Just 34 percent of eighth graders across the country today are proficient in reading. For black and Hispanic students, that number drops to 16 percent and 21 percent, respectively.¹ American students still rank in the middle of the pack internationally. U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 25th, 24th, and 40th in science, reading, and mathematics achievement, respectively.² Data from the U.S. Department of Education's long-term trend study show that reading and mathematics achievement have largely stagnated over the past half-century for high school seniors. This underperformance is most apparent in some of America's largest school systems. In 2017, for example, 13 Baltimore schools did not have a single student proficient in math.³

This lackluster academic performance underscores the ineffectiveness of large-scale federal intervention in K-12 education. Despite the many federal reform efforts from the mid-20th century forward, and the hundreds of federal programs since President Lyndon Johnson launched the education component of his war on poverty in 1965, academic achievement outcomes have been flat. American taxpayers have spent some \$2 trillion over the past half-century at the federal level alone to support these hundreds of programs—a sum which does not include state and local expenditures, and as such, represents just 10 percent of all K-12 education spending.⁴ Americans, then, have every reason to expect better from their public education system.

Academic underperformance is one reason school choice has seen such incredible growth across the country over the past two decades. In 2000, just four school choice programs were in operation in the U.S. Today, more than 60 school choice programs are at work in more than half of the states.⁵

Access to education choice is improving academic outcomes for students across the country in a way that large-scale federal programs have failed to do. Seventeen rigorous studies have examined the impact of school choice on academic achievement, and 11 of those evaluations found significant increases in academic outcomes for participants.⁶ Three randomized controlled trial evaluations have looked

specifically at the impact of school choice on graduation rates and academic attainment. In each of those rigorous evaluations, researchers found that matriculation and attainment outcomes increased significantly for some or all school choice participants.⁷

Education choice, however, is and should be about far more than just improved academic outcomes; indeed, researchers have begun to examine the policy's other effects.⁸ Research has demonstrated that school choice meaningfully improves students' lives beyond K-12: It increases their chances of attending and persisting through college, decreases their chances of being involved in criminal activity, improves their earnings potential, and leads to parents who are more satisfied with their children's educational experiences.⁹

School choice also has an impact on family dynamics, enabling parents, as University of Arkansas professor Patrick Wolf has identified, "to move from the margins to the centers of their child's educational experience."¹⁰ In sum, the benefits of education choice accrue to some of the most important aspects of students' lives.

School choice is a means to achieving numerous important goals: it fosters upward economic mobility, instills civic values, engenders an appreciation for the arts and humanities, even strengthens national security, and imparts students with the knowledge and the skills necessary to pursue their life and career goals. Education choice, at its essence, serves as a vehicle through which the individual is able to attain his highest aspirations.

How do schools of choice foster these ends? Many model what Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution called "the success sequence": graduate high school, get a job, get married, and then have children.

As detailed below, Dr. Wilcox's deep study of the success sequence has yielded invaluable findings about the impact adhering to this sequence can have on one's future life outcomes. For example, 97 percent of Millennials who follow the success sequence do not end up in poverty once they reach young adulthood.¹¹

Fostering the Success Sequence (Brad Wilcox)

Wendy Wang, my colleague at the Institute for Family Studies (IFS), and I published a report called the *Millennial Success Sequence* this past summer of

2017 for IFS and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).¹² What we find is that, as Isabel Sawhill and Ron Haskins at Brookings would predict, younger adults today who are following this sequence—getting at least a high school degree, working full time in their 20s, and then marrying before having any children—are much more likely to steer clear of poverty and much more likely to make their way into the middle class or upper class by the time they are in their late 20s or their 30s.

The tried-and-true sequence remains valid even for today’s younger adults. We not only find that 97 percent of those who follow the sequence are not poor, but also, looking at the effect of following the sequence in a more multivariate context, that having a marriage before the baby carriage makes the odds of being poor 60 percent lower, even controlling for things like age, education, ethnicity, and race.¹³

The Success Sequence and Education Choice.

Education, work, and marriage—each in its own way—affect adults’ economic well-being. One important takeaway here is that we have, in the world of education reform, not focused as much as we might on the role of family. We need to do more to bring the family-strengthening crowd into conversation with the education-reform crowd, and to recognize how much they could work together.

It is reminiscent of James Coleman’s groundbreaking 1966 report on the quality of educational opportunity.¹⁴ Coleman found that a huge predictor of educational outcomes for children is family structure, parental education, family income, and so on.

Schools can and should do a lot more to strengthen the educational outcomes of children. But they can only do so much, and if we fail to do more to strengthen families in terms of structure, process, and economics, we will not get as far as we could in bridging racial divides as well as emerging economic divides in American schools.

Bruce Bradbury and Jane Waldfogel, in their work on the educational gap and the socioeconomic status (SES) gap in American schools, have driven home this point.¹⁵ Bradbury and Waldfogel found that the gap between children from higher SES families and lower SES families at age five looks a lot like it does at age 18. These gaps are oftentimes growing before a child actually enters into the formal school system. Addressing these gaps requires that we think about what can we do *at home* for children, before and outside school.

The work of David Autor and by my colleagues in various Institute for Family Studies reports indicates a growing kind of a gender gap, where boys are more likely than girls to be floundering in our schools today, particularly lower-income boys.¹⁶ These reports suggest that family structure plays an important part in the creation of this gender gap. Lower-income boys without fathers in the home are particularly likely to be floundering at school and to be suspended in school, as evidenced by studies conducted in Florida and Arizona and elsewhere.¹⁷

If we are interested in addressing both the economic divide and the gender divide in our schools, we need to be thinking much more about strengthening families and figuring out ways to get more and more fathers back into the home to help raise and to be good role models for their children, and their sons in particular.

Unless and until we do that work of strengthening the family, of bringing more fathers into the picture, we will not make as much progress as we otherwise might in bridging the economic divides, the racial divides, and the gender divides in American life when it comes to the schools.

That is why we need to think more about how to strengthen families. We need to think about ways in which schools can talk more about the success sequence and educate children in both public and private schools about the importance of finishing high school, working full time in their 20s, and then marrying before having any children.

The Long-Term Impact of Education Choice.

As we think about the long-term effects of school choice and also different types of schooling, we should consider what impact school choice is having on family formation, in terms of marriage, non-marital childbearing, age at first birth, and family formation outcomes, and then consider which types of schooling are more likely to foster marriage and having children within marriage down the road.

Researchers have not really studied those kinds of links. We do know, for instance, when it comes to vocational education, that young men who have gone through career academies are more likely to be not only doing better when it comes to earnings and work relative to their peers with similar backgrounds, but also more likely to be married as younger adults.

We need to think about the way in which school choice may or may not affect family formation in ways that are important and valuable. It will be

important to try to encourage public schools, charter schools, private schools, and religious schools, to be more intentional about preparing their students for higher education and for work, but also for family life.

This is not simply a matter of personal responsibility and personal agency. We also need to be thinking about ways to strengthen opportunities for African American boys in particular and low-income boys in general. We need to be thinking about doing more when it comes to vocational education and apprenticeship training, because there are many unfilled jobs in information technology, in manufacturing, in nursing, and so forth, for which we are not really equipping our children who are not on the college track.

If our schools could do a much better job of doing more on the vocational apprenticeship tracks, that would make young adults in general more marriageable. We need to try to increase the economic opportunities that young adults have, young men in particular, that would make them think of themselves more as marriageable, and would make them more attractive, too, as potential spouses.

The Private School Advantage and the Case of Cornerstone School (Derrick Max)

You cannot address right thinking if you have not addressed right living. Cornerstone is a classical school focused on virtue and the virtuous mind and virtuous character, enabling us to delve into the greater things that God has planned for us through learning.¹⁸

We focus a lot on right thinking. We have very rigorous academics, but we also embody that in right living. I really do not care about where my students fall on some scale of income; what I care about is that they grow up to know and love God passionately and that they live virtuous lives and that whatever their circumstances, they live with character, with integrity, and they love their neighbor as themselves. Ultimately, it does not matter what their paycheck says. If they are living that life, our world will be much better off.

I am also more keenly aware since getting out of the economist's world and into the practical world that the indications of poverty are often far more complex than we like to say. The circumstances of poverty are often not the products of choices; for that reason, we need to make sure that the students we are educating have the values and the strength necessary to face the challenges that may come their way.

What have we done if we have created students who have decent middle incomes or high incomes, but are selfish, lack integrity, and do not love their neighbor? I think we have wasted our time.

Moreover, our culture is making it much harder to have the success sequence. I do not know how kids make it today with the technology that they have in their pockets; with the distractions, the lack of quiet, and the inability to sleep; single-parent homes; a culture with a me-first mentality that asks kids at the most vulnerable time in life to start pondering whether they are male or female. I just cannot imagine a world in 20 years that can survive this if we continue down this path.

God has a plan. My prayer is that our kids see that plan. You do not have to be a Christian to come to Cornerstone, but I always tell them my prayer is that they are when they leave.

God has blessed us with a fantastic group of students and teachers who model Christian living. It is not uncommon to see our teachers praying with students between classes, staying late to help them in their subjects, but more importantly, just loving them and praying for them in isolation. For me, the virtuous mind is the ultimate goal with teaching centered on God's Word.

The Parent Experience. You know the horror stories. I always ask a parent when they come to Cornerstone: Why are you changing schools? And the stories I hear become more bizarre every year, from the student getting As and Bs but cannot read to the student with all As in Algebra I and II but did not know the times tables. (Yet parents were oblivious to this because they had been getting good grades.)

I honestly believe our schools are in worse shape than the data would suggest. At Anacostia High School [a public school in Washington, DC], if the fire alarm gets pulled, they cancel school because it takes two hours to get back in through the metal detector and to check bags and to pat down students. Depending on the time the fire alarm is pulled, they just do not let students come back into the school because the day is over.

We have students who will tell you they had math teachers who had no math training and did not teach math. Cornerstone is taking kids, some of whom are in crisis, some of whom have more solid families, that just need some place to support them. We believe parents are the first and most important teachers a child will ever have.

Putting the Success Sequence into Practice in Schools. I do think a lot about this in trying to develop the virtuous student. It prepares you for marriage and life in a lot of ways. At our school, we do not yell at students. One of our philosophies with teachers is that in a well-managed classroom, the students should be treated with dignity and respect and the teachers should be treated with dignity and respect. I do not need to yell at a student to redirect them; I can guide them non-verbally, and if they fail to understand that, then they have asked to not be a part of the community.

That is such an important thing for marriage. Our students are taught how to have disagreements and conflict in a sensible way. For example, one of the models at Cornerstone is that we do not have a lot of lecturing; we do a lot of integrated learning where the students read and engage in debate. It has to be done in a respectful and honorable manner, and that all goes to make you the kind of person that someone would want to marry (or to hire).

Fostering Choice, Creating Opportunity (Lindsey M. Burke)

As the example of Cornerstone School illustrates, private schools have a particular intentionality about their approach to teaching and student learning. Families empowered to select such schools and

find options that are the right fit for their children is what drives the success of school choice. Education choice improves academic outcomes for participants and non-participants; better students' chances of graduating high school; increases students' chances of attending and persisting through college; decreases their chances of being involved in criminal activity; enhances their earnings potential; and leads to parents who are more satisfied with their children's educational experiences.

But perhaps most importantly, choice provides access to education options that prepare students for all that life may hold, equipping them to be successful in marriage and family formation. Ultimately, as Heritage Foundation research has shown, enabling students to choose schools that are the right fit for them prepares them to inherit the blessings and the liberties of a free society.¹⁹

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