

WHY CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION



Angel Pittman and Rachel Gunter Shapard

CHRISTIANITY & PUBLIC EDUCATION

Ray Johnson, Coordinator at
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
of Florida

Let's be honest: Jesus ministered in a time and place where public education, as practiced by western democracies, did not exist. Still, when we Christians read the Bible, particularly the teachings of Jesus, we will come across principles and facts that will influence our thinking about our children and public education. Here are just a few truths to consider.

Jesus focused much of his ministry on education. He was called "Rabbi," which we know means "Teacher." When children were brought to him while he was teaching, his response to those who sought to prevent these interruptions was, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14 NRS)

This really shouldn't surprise us because the Hebrew scriptures in which Jesus was immersed contain numerous traditions that speak to the importance of education, starting with the Torah, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament. Christians think of the Torah as "the Law," but in truth, the word means "Instruction" or "Teaching." The daily Jewish prayer, known as The

Shema, is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and it includes this critical command in verses 6 and 7: "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home." (NRS)

The Hebrew prophets emphasized the importance of caring for the nation's children. For them, it was a matter of justice, and the well-being of children was a sign of God's blessing. For example, Isaiah says, "All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children." (Isaiah 54:13 NRS)

The songs and the sages of ancient Israel also lifted the value of children and their education. The Psalmist sings, "Children are a gift from the Lord." (Psalm 127:3 NIV) And the writer of Proverbs teaches, "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching" (Pro. 1:8 NRS).

It seems clear from the teachings of the Bible generally, and Jesus, particularly, that Christians should care about children's education.



THE BIBLE SAYS...

The ability to learn is a gift from God. Christians are imparted by Scripture to see children as a blessing, not a commodity by which to make money. Christians care about local public schools because in public schools every single child is offered acceptance. In public schools, not only does learning happen, but basic needs of children are met. In public schools Christians are able to exercise the Biblical call to love their neighbor as themselves.

Christians should care, therefore, that all children have the same high-quality educational opportunities regardless of their racial background or zip code. Both the Old and New Testaments highlight the responsibility of Christians to reverse injustice.

Learning, Wisdom, & Education

- Proverbs 1:7-9
- Proverbs 16:16
- Proverbs 18:5
- Proverbs 22:6

Children are a blessing

- Psalm 127: 3-5
- Proverbs 17:6
- Matthew 18:10
- Mark 10:14
- John 16:21

Caring for the Marginalized

- Micah 6:8
- Proverbs 21:15
- Amos 5:24
- Isaiah 1:17
- Isaiah 61:8
- Proverbs 24:24-25
- Zechariah 7:9
- Ecclesiastes 3:17
- Luke 18:1-8
- Psalm 33:5
- Romans 13:4
- Jeremiah 9: 23-24
- Deuteronomy 27:19
- Proverbs 21:3
- Psalm 37:27-29,

WHY NOW?

The state of public schools

Public schools are the primary means of educating our nation's children. Serving approximately 90% of U.S. school-age children, Public schools promote equality and strengthen our economy. Equitable public education advances society with the power to break the cycle of poverty, giving students the tools needed to pursue a successful, self-sufficient future. Investments in education gain significant long-term economic returns, including a more robust economy and fewer societal problems.

SCHOOL CHOICE

What does it mean?

The false narrative that is widely shared by the high paid lobbyist groups that promote the privatization of education is this: traditional public education is failing. Privatizers' answer to under-performing schools has been to provide less financial support for traditional public schools and channel more funding into school choice.

While it is undoubtedly true that not

every public school is an "A" school, low-income schools struggle disproportionately to educate students successfully. With less and less funding for traditional public schools coupled with the lack of supplemental funds from active Parent-Teacher Associations in low-income schools, they are at the highest risk of falling prey to privatization efforts.

Public schools are the places where children living below the poverty level are taught, fed, affirmed, and loved. Public schools cannot be expected to overcome the challenges created by rising poverty, with decreased funding every year.

While educational "choice" is essential, many don't realize that most charter schools and private schools serve a significantly disproportionately lower percentage of students with special needs and economically disadvantaged students, even when the schools are located within low-income areas.

Pro-privatization groups, which include politicians and corporate interests, promote "student choice" as an answer to the problems faced in U.S. education, but that can intentionally be a confusing term. Many public school districts across the country offer "choice" programs, including the choice of which neighborhood school to choose as well as magnet schools and other programs within traditional public school systems, so it is essential to note what all the different terms mean.

SCHOOL CHOICE DEFINED

Traditional Public School

The historically public neighborhood school is governed by elected school boards or under mayoral control, with certified teachers who are state employees, following all pupil non-discrimination laws, and educating significant numbers of students with special needs.

Magnet Public School

Magnets are fully public schools with all of the above elements, but may also receive/raise additional funding to maintain their specialized programs such as STEM, Performing Arts, or Engineering that pull students from across the district as a "magnet."

Charter Schools

These schools are privately governed tuition-free schools funded by tax dollars. Though the local school may be a non-profit, charter schools may be operated by for-profit parent companies whose leaders are not educators and are often located out of state. Several states do not require charter school teachers to be certified, and their teachers are usually not public employees. Charter schools have historically served a disproportionately low percentage of children with disabilities and English Language Learners.

Voucher Programs

Programs in each state that utilize public funds for private and religious school education through a voucher that pays a portion of the private schools' tuition. Additionally, tuition tax credits allow elementary and secondary private school education through Education Savings Accounts. These allow parents to spend the money that would have gone to the public school for private services.

Many faith groups warn that vouchers harm religious liberty and infringe on the separation of church and state by using public funds for private religious indoctrination, or by applying government standards to otherwise independent religious schools.

Private schools are subject to far fewer regulations. For example, they can selectively choose their students, are not subject to the same laws regarding transparency, teacher certification, and in some states, are exempt from accountability testing.

THE ISSUE OF FUNDING

Elementary and secondary public education is funded through a combination of federal, state, and local dollars. While the recession of 2008 is often cited as a significant contributor to decreased funding for public education, it is not the whole story.

First, the local funding piece of public school is inequitable in most states. Only three states—Alaska, Vermont, and Wyoming—provide higher funding for property-poor districts than for their more affluent peers.

Secondly, public investment in schools has declined over the last decade and has not been able to reach pre-recession levels.

Finally, some states have not only cut public education funding, but also income tax rates, which are often schools' primary source of revenue.[1] Education Week, in their annual Quality Counts report, gave the United States a "C" grade for school finance for 2020.[2] While we are spending less on education, we are also dividing those funds up in unprecedented ways. Historically, public funds went to traditional public schools.

Not anymore!



Charter Schools

While high performing charter schools exist, a system of mismanagement and outright fraud has been documented in the charter school industry. An in-depth report by the Network for Public Education found that between 2006-2014, "approximately \$1.17 billion in federal funding has likely been spent on charters that either never opened, or that opened and have since shut down."^[3]

Utilizing public dollars for education should require transparency—however, many states and local school districts fail to give proper oversight regarding fiscal and regulatory matters. Opening a charter school is a simple process in many states. Charter applications require evidence of the following: that an educational mission and target student population have been established; that a research-based curriculum will be utilized; that services will be offered for students with special needs; and that the proposed budget includes their management



In 1999, only about 9,135 students in grades K-12 attended a charter school. Today, nearly 1 in 10 students attend a charter school equaling roughly 3.2 million students whose funding is pulled from the same budgets as traditional public schools.

plan and governance structure.

However, it is what they are not required to share that is most troubling. In the state of Florida. Applicants seeking to open a charter school do not have to disclose a criminal record, a financial history, any experience running a school, or any previous affiliation with a failed school. For example, a 22-year-old with no education experience applied for and received a charter for a school. ^[4]

They do not even have to identify the facility where classes will be held, and those facilities do not have school building codes. The private investor owns these school buildings. Charter schools can request funding allocated for public school renovations and upkeep. The investment in the buildings and school grounds benefits the property owner because, as state supreme courts have upheld, the property doesn't belong to the school, but the parent corporations and investors. In contrast, when we invest in public school buildings, those properties are owned by the school district and the public trust.

Given the easy application process and lack of oversight, it is easy to see why privatizing education has become so popular despite the U.S.

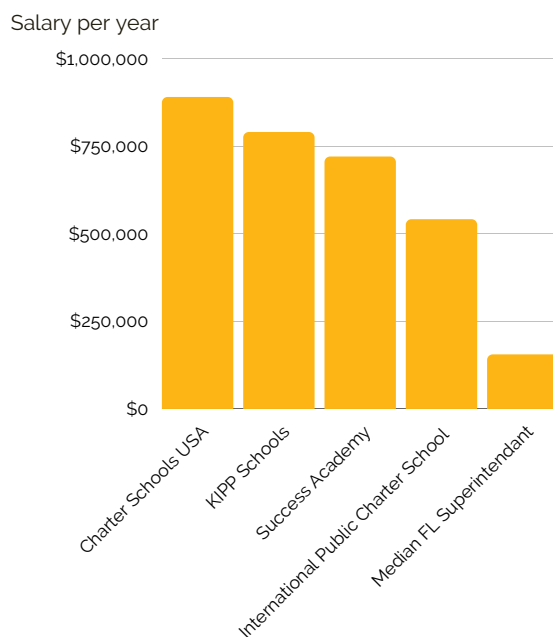
Department of Education reporting that charter school students perform comparably to students in traditional public schools. Without stringent state government and district-level

Charter Schools continued

regulation, outside groups and local news agencies often stand-alone in holding charter schools accountable, and what they find is troubling[5]. Charter schools consistently spend less on instruction, less on special education, and double or even triple on administration. It's not hard to see why administration costs would be so high as charter school's CEOs earn enormous salaries.

CHARTER SCHOOLS CEO SALARIES

a closer look



Voucher Programs

To fund our public schools adequately, we must say NO to vouchers or voucher schemes, commonly referred to as neo-vouchers. What started as a choice has turned in to what could be described as a hostile takeover of public education. The number of students using public money to fund private school education through a voucher has grown alarmingly. There are 15 states and the District of Columbia with traditional voucher programs. In total, 28 states plus the District of Columbia have a traditional voucher or neo-voucher programs. [6]

Vouchers and neo-vouchers funnel public funds to unaccountable private and religious schools taking desperately needed funding away from the public schools and infringing upon our religious freedoms. Vouchers first joined the national education arena in 1990 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They were created to give low-income families more high-quality educational options, focusing

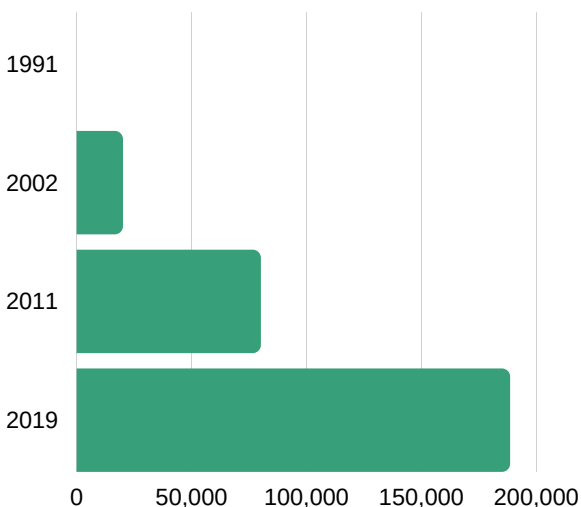


almost exclusively on African-American students living in poverty. Now nearly 200,000 students receive vouchers, and many vouchers programs do not have income qualifications. In the past four years especially, from the highest echelons of power at the federal, state, and local levels, there has been tremendous support for expanding programs that use public funding for private and religious school education. Leading faith groups warn that such vouchers harm religious liberty and infringe upon the separation of church and state while favoring the few students over the needs of all students. Although private schools have the right to create their admission policies, they should be held to the



VOUCHERS INCREASE

number of students using vouchers in US



same standards that prohibit discrimination of any form when they accept public funds. There is a commonly held myth that private school children receive a better education than public school children. However, a longitudinal study done by researchers at the University of Virginia of children from kindergarten to ninth grade found that only controlling for socioeconomic factors, all advantages were removed.[7]

FUNDING EDUCATION IN A TIME OF COVID

Traditional public schools are governmental entities, and as such, were not allowed to receive funds through the new federal government's economic package, the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP),

However, charter schools are private companies and could apply for PPP. They received astounding amounts of funding while they also received funding from school budgets due to their status as part of local public school systems. Many charter school management companies are supported by billionaires, including the Walton Family of Wal-Mart, the Koch brothers, Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg, and have large cash balances. According to a preliminary analysis of Treasury Department data by a variety of news outlets, it is estimated that charter schools received more than \$1 billion in PPP.

One charter school management group, Achievement First, took out tens of millions in PPP loans even as they had already received a \$3.5 million grant from the federal government through their public school status. [8]



EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Equality refers to how people are treated. It is generic, group-focused, and equal. In the realm of education, this means providing students equivalent instruction in quantity and quality. Equity is about giving each student the tools he or she specifically needs to thrive. Equity is adaptable, individual-focused, and fair. It is more expensive to provide those students who require more support to learn than typical learners making them less desirable for privatized schools. The inequity seen in charter schools alone is an enormous concern for educational advocates.[9] A quick online search will reveal many studies that show continual ploys by charter school operators to deny entry to students, excluding children with disabilities and English Language Learners. [10]

Not only do charter schools enroll fewer children with disabilities and English Language Learners, but they have also routinely been accused of systematically weeding out difficult or academically struggling students. The New York Times reported on one widely acclaimed group of schools, Success Charters, and their practice of “suspending students or calling parents into frequent meetings as ways to force parents to fall in line or prompt them to withdraw their children.” [11] Additionally, charter schools have been habitually harsh in regards to student discipline. A study published in the American Educational Research Journal, found a “gap between what Black and Latinx parents want and what choice schools and local school choice markets have to offer.” [12]

The responsibility to make Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) available to all students with disabilities applies to ALL public schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Therefore, charter schools bear the same responsibility. Yet a report by the Government Accountability Office published in 2012 showed that special education students made up only 8.2 percent of charter school students during the 2009–2010 school year, below the average at traditional public schools of 11.2 percent in 2009–2010, and 11.3 percent the previous year. [13]

Additionally, funding schemes by privatizers are often dependent on property values, and in some districts, this leads to racial disparity. A recent study found that predominantly non-white schools receive \$23 billion less in funding nationwide than predominantly white schools. [14]

WHAT CAN WE DO

Action Steps

How to ensure ALL children have access to high quality public education

- Consider a church-school partnership. Teachers in high need school schools, in particular, spend disproportionately more of their own funds for needed supplies—your partnership can impact this disparity.
- Vote for pro-public education candidates. Do your research and make education a priority when electing state and federal leaders.
- Talk to your faith leaders about the importance of involvement in the neighborhood public schools in their communities and participate in advocacy efforts that provide solutions not just for some, but for all God's children.
- Discuss education issues with friends who may not have children in public schools. Talk about why it is essential to support public education while at the same time making the best choice for their children.
- Talk to local business leaders and military families who understand how educated citizens benefit the economy, communities, and the nation.
- Attend school district meetings when academic issues are discussed to learn and advocate for public education.
- Contact local leaders, state education officials, and all elected/appointed leadership who make decisions regarding public schools to express support for policies that provide all children—no matter their ZIP code—with access to high-quality public education.

LEARN MORE

Read, Connect, &
Get Involved

Pastors for Children Network:

Pastors for Texas Children

<https://www.pastorsfortexaschildren.com/>

Pastors for Florida Children

<https://www.facebook.com/PastorsForFloridaChildren/>

Pastors for Tennessee Children

<https://www.pastorsfortennesseechildren.org/>

Pastors for Oklahoma Children

<https://pastorsforoklahomakids.com/>

Pastors for North Carolina Children

<https://pastorsfornccchildren.org/>

Pastors for Kentucky Children

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Pastors-for-Kentucky-Children-149663502390433/>

Other

Network for Public Education

<https://networkforpubliceducation.org/>

Public Funds-Public Schools

<https://pfps.org/>

National Education Association

<https://www.nea.org/>

Southern Poverty Law

<https://www.splcenter.org/>



Learn More continued

Footnotes

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<https://www.epi.org/press/new-study-of-11-cities-finds-the-growth-of-charter-schools-has-increased-inequality-in-education/>

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