



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

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## Summary

Parents are critical to significant improvements in learning. However, the current government education system severely restricts their involvement. For significant change parents must be given freedom and responsibility over their children's education.

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## Improve education by empowering parents

*By Nick Weller*

Criticism of and frustration with education often focuses on the role of schools and pays less attention to the importance of families in academic achievement. Nonetheless, common sense, as well as studies by the U.S. Department of Education and many university researchers, suggest that parents have a significant impact on student performance. To achieve long-term improvement in learning parents must become full partners in providing education.

The government education system, however, erects significant barriers to parental involvement by giving those within education control over money, curriculum and policies. Parents are significantly limited in their ability to make important decisions, such as where their child attends school. Attempts to involve parents through conferences, site councils, and parent groups are laudable, but this type of involvement, which often takes massive amounts of time with little chance to improve a child's education, may discourage parents from further involvement.

The original advocates for common, government schools wanted to reduce the role of parents in educating children. Horace Mann, often called the father of public education, said, “We who are engaged in the sacred cause of education are entitled to look upon all parents as having given hostages to our cause.” Similarly, an 1851 article in *The Massachusetts Teacher* declares, “[T]he children must be gathered up and forced into school, and those who resist or impede this plan, whether parents or priests, must be held accountable and punished.”

In the early 1900s Oregon voters passed a law strongly supported by the Ku Klux Klan to force all children into government schools. The U.S. Supreme Court overthrew the law in the 1925 *Pierce vs. Society of Sisters* case, opining, “The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.”

Sadly, the court's notions of responsibility and freedom have not taken hold. Just last year the *Oregonian* reported that Portland School Board Member Derry Jack-

son said in a public meeting, parents' responsibility for education ends at age five. "Your job is to get your child to school," Jackson told parents. Although perhaps extreme, Jackson's view reflects one ingrained in the government education system.

There has been some recent change as policies giving parents greater control over education have gained traction. In *More Than Grades: How Choice Boosts Parental Involvement and Benefits Children*, education consultant Philip Vassallo examines how parental choice in a child's school affects participation. Compared with public school parents, Vassallo finds parents utilizing vouchers, private scholarships and charter schools, "(1) monitor their children's work more and help them more often; (2) get more involved with their children's school; (3) seek and find environments that offer their children safety, discipline, and better instructional quality; (4) are more satisfied with their children's new school than they were with their previous schools across a range of indicators; and (5) are more likely to reenroll their children in their schools of choice."

Tamar Hare, executive director of the Children's Scholarship Fund – Portland, which is facilitated by Cascade Policy Institute and provides low-income families with money for school tuition, concurs with Vassallo's findings. She notes, "Working with the families who receive private scholarships has shown that many parents want to be involved in their children's education but often don't have the opportunity. Choice helps alleviate that situation."

Some critics try to minimize such increases in parental involvement by arguing that parents who participate in choice programs are already more motivated than other parents. It is difficult to control for previous motivation in academic studies, but preliminary research suggests that offering choice improves parental involvement regardless of previous activity. Even if critics are correct, it is repugnant to force some parents to sacrifice a better education for their children because the benefits of choice may be uneven.

Government schools face criticism not because of the people who work within them, but because the system's design disenfranchises parents and discourages their involvement. A partial remedy to this may be found in school vouchers such as those affirmed in the recent *Zelman vs. Simmons-Harris* U.S. Supreme Court decision. To attain long-term educational improvement proposed solutions must address the role of parents and give them the opportunity to make substantive decisions about their children's education.

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