

# Charter schools: need to explore what school choice really means (17)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Charter Schools, Education, Serious Issues March 20, 2019

*(17th in a series on Education and Charter Schools)*

**Timely to our discussion is the showing of the “Backpack full of Cash” documentary this Thursday, March 21, 6:30pm – 8:00pm at NITSCHMANN MIDDLE SCHOOL, sponsored by Bethlehem Proud Parents – Free!**

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Gadfly:

When discussing the concept of school choice, I think it's important to ask “what is the role of public education in our society?” Scholars typically cite three primary goals of public education in a democratic society—1. Prepare individual students with skills necessary to succeed in our society (individual economic opportunity); 2. Prepare students to fill positions in the US job market (vocational training); and 3. Prepare students to be full participants in our democracy (education for active citizenship). Most schools try to balance these three aims as they design policies and curriculum, and throughout US history, there has been tension among the proponents of each approach. However, I doubt many would propose wholly eliminating any of these aims.

The concept of school choice allows individuals to privilege the first goal—individual pursuit of human capital for future personal gain—at the expense of the third goal (and potentially the second). Universal public education that integrates children of ALL races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, religions, etc., in preparation for participation in a diverse society is antithetical to the concept of school choice in a society where major inequities exist in funding and resources across these demographic lines. If we allow individuals to act solely in their self-interest, many (if not most) students who already have access to more

resources are going to choose other options (private schools, charters) as a way to escape from underfunded public schools, creating both a vicious cycle of underfunding and a segregated system where marginalized students become further marginalized and isolated. When we center the question on the societal goals of free, universal public education, school choice just doesn't make sense. Are we willing to give up the lofty goals of a society in which equal opportunity for success and civic participation is guaranteed to all? While we're far from that reality, the more we expand opportunities for school choice, the more we concede that our society was set up to be unequal, and we abandon all aspirations toward meritocracy.

Many people like the idea of school choice, but I think it is worth exploring what that really means, and if it actually allows us to sustain a diverse democracy. Is making it easier to act solely in one's own interest good for our society as a whole?

Anna