

School Choice in Idaho

Response by Senator Brian Lenney
District 13, Nampa, ID

Q: So how would you respond to those who would say that there is essentially no difference between these bills?

A: Vouchers are about the government giving money to private schools. Whereas ESAs are about empowering parents and trusting them to make the right educational decisions for their own children. More than anything, I trust parents and believe they need to be put in charge of every aspect of their child's education... including the money that's allocated for it.

So when people equate "school choice" with "vouchers," they're misspeaking. Because school choice is an umbrella term for several different things.

It could mean tax credits (Florida does this), education savings accounts or ESAs (like Arizona), or vouchers. They're all VERY different, and to my knowledge, nobody is pushing a voucher model in Idaho.

Think of vouchers like a cashier's check - you go to the bank and request a check be made out to a specific person for a specific amount. You can only use it in ONE place. Vouchers are like that. The government "writes a check" to a specific school for a specific purpose and I'm not a fan of that.

Instead, I like what Arizona and West Virginia did - the ESA model. This is where each student gets a specific amount of money (e.g. \$6,000) put in an account for their education expenses every year. And they can spend it any way they want - on tutors, homeschool supplies, private school tuition, online learning, and of course, public schools. It's 100% up to the parent and student how they spend it, as long as they spend it on education.

Can you imagine a family of four kids getting \$24,000 every year to spend any way they want (on education)? For most families, it'd change their lives. That's what ESAs do, and they are very different from vouchers.

Now as far as “moving public dollars into private education,” we’ve been doing that for decades! We spend public dollars on private and even religious institutions when we fund: Pell Grants, GI Bill, Pre-K, Head Start, Food stamps, WIC, Medicaid, Medicare, Section 8, government contracts, etc... it’s nothing new.

So, why not do it in education?

Because contrary to popular belief, school choice doesn’t defund public schools. It gives parents and students more options that aren’t based on the zip code they live in. That’s all.

From the many studies I’ve read - I’ve learned that areas with robust ESA/school choice programs actually see an academic IMPROVEMENT in public school academics! Because if schools everywhere are competing for money (instead of getting it automatically) they’ll have to either get better or become irrelevant.

So at the end of the day, school choice is a free-market solution for education.

Q: My second question is really more of a philosophical question. You've been very outspoken about school choice and you now sit on the Senate Education Committee. Where does this issue rank among your legislative priorities, and why?

A: Pushing for educational freedom (aka school choice) is the absolute top priority for me as a State Senator on the Education committee. Because I’m convinced the best way to help students and parents is to give them more options, more freedom, and more opportunity - full-stop. When it comes to education, nothing is more important.