



## Hypocrisy on School Choice Sends Wrong Message to Kids

by Joshua R. Pater

### Summary

Michigan legislators and public school teachers—many of whom oppose tuition vouchers and tax credits to help more families send their children to private K-12 schools—are far more likely to choose private schools for their own children. If school choice works for legislators and teachers, it should be an option for everyone.

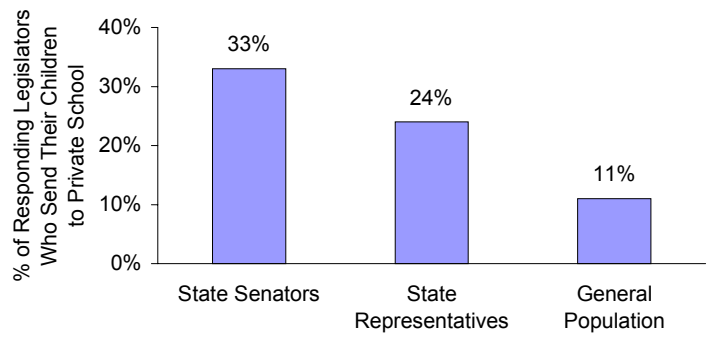
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Did you know that state legislators send their children to private schools two- to three-times as often as do Michigan parents generally? Or that Detroit teachers send their children to private schools at nearly twice the rate of Detroit parents?

A survey this past summer by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy asked Michigan legislators confidentially about the educational choices they have made for their own families. Eighty-nine percent of the Senate answered our questions, as did 90 percent of the House. Of those with school-age children, 33 percent of senators and 24 percent of representatives responding currently send or have sent a child to a private school. Fully one-third of legislators who serve on education-related committees chose private schools over public.

In other words, two- to three-times as many state legislators choose to send their own children to private schools as the 11 percent or less of the general population that currently is financially able to choose private schooling. In fact, more than four times as many senators—as much as 47 percent of those with school-age-children—send their children to private schools when they live in or near public school districts that would qualify for the school choice plan offered under Proposal 1 on Michigan’s November ballot.

### Michigan Legislators Are More Likely to Send Their Children to Private Schools



Source: Mackinac Center for Public Policy survey, summer 2000

State representatives and senators earn \$57,000 per year, not counting a \$10,000 expense allowance, \$62,000 for office costs, and some of the most generous medical benefits available. The average Michigan worker earns \$37,000. Clearly, legislators are in a better position than most to choose their family’s education.

Is school choice hypocrisy too strong a charge to level at legislators? Those who support choice for everyone in both word and deed are certainly not hypocrites, but those who oppose choice for lower-income citizens while exercising it for themselves surely are open to the charge.

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Nonetheless, Michigan legislators still choose their nearby public schools to a greater extent than do members of Congress. When the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation surveyed Congress earlier this year, it found that not a single member of that august body had a child in a District of Columbia public school. A voucher bill for the district was vetoed by President Clinton, who sent daughter Chelsea to an elite private academy. Vice President Al Gore, who opposes vouchers for K-12 schools (even though he does support tax credits for college), sent all four of his children to exclusive, expensive private schools.

Private choices also can be found in another group: public school teachers. In 1995, education analyst Denis Doyle found that Michigan public school teachers send their children to private schools at a higher rate than the nation at large. In Detroit, public school teachers are almost twice as likely to do so as city residents on average, 33 percent compared with 17 percent. In Grand Rapids, 41 percent of public teachers were choosing private schools, while the rate for the community at large was 27 percent.

What is the public to think when those who know the public schools best send their children elsewhere in such numbers? What would we conclude if it were discovered that 41 percent of chefs don't eat in their own restaurants?

Most people would agree that a good many public schools are in trouble, especially those in our inner cities. That's why those fortunate enough to have the wherewithal are exercising a choice option that sadly is unavailable to people of more modest or limited means. Meanwhile, too many legislators and union leaders still see only increased funding—not wider choice—as the solution. But Michigan has been down that road before. While state public school enrollment increased only 7 percent from 1988 to 1998, spending grew an astounding 61 percent. Yet, during that same period, student performance has stagnated, according to *Michigan Education Report*.

Legislators who use their above-average incomes to send their children to private schools should be commended for making the sacrifice to pay twice—once in taxes for public schools and again for private tuition—and choose what they believe to be the best and safest options for their own children. It seems reasonable to expect that, given the chance, they would want to empower low-income families with the same choices. If school choice can work for significant numbers of legislators and public school teachers, why shouldn't it be open to everyone?

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