



From Florida, a progressive school of thought

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In 1990, Florida passed an education reform bill that included a novel provision for special education students in one Florida county. The parents of each special education student in that county were eligible to receive a McKay Scholarship, which allowed the parents to choose between keeping their child in the local school system, or using the scholarship money to obtain services for their child outside of their public school system. If a parent of a special education student felt that their child's needs would be better met by a different setting than the one provided by the local school district, the parent was allowed to arrange for the child's transfer.

The state paid for the private service up to the amount spent in the previous year in the public school system. The parent was free to choose among a host of options better suited to the child's needs: a neighboring public school system, a religious school, a private not for profit, or a private for profit school.

In 1999, Florida expanded the McKay Scholarships experiment to encompass the entire state. During the 2000-2001 school year, the first year the McKay scholarships were available to the general Florida special ed population, a total of 977 parents opted for a scholarship. In 2001-2002, the number of participating children leapt to 4997. By 2002-2003 the number had risen to 8200.

Clearly an increasing number of parents think that the alternative of the McKay scholarship is well worth trying.

Would it be worth trying a McKay-type scholarship in Massachusetts? Not only would such a program expand the educational choices that parents of special education students have, it could also save the Commonwealth some money in these times of fiscal crisis.

About 17 percent of all Massachusetts school children are enrolled in special education. This is the highest percentage of any state in the country, and far above the national average of 12 percent. The special education designation encompasses a broad range of disabilities, each requiring different handling and a different Individual Plan of Instruction. The requirements of a child with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), for example, are vastly different from those of a sight-impaired student. It is difficult, even for a very large school system, to offer services that effectively meet the needs of all the children in special education. It is also exceedingly expensive. In some districts, special education accounts for as much as 26 percent of total education expenditures. It is almost impossible, even for the largest school district, to assemble a class of special ed children of the same level of ability and of somewhat comparable needs (This is the ideal, but it is rarely achieved).

The McKay alternative allows the private market to exercise its ingenuity to meet those needs more effectively.

In numerous cases around the Commonwealth, parents with children in special education have taken school boards to court in order to try to obtain the services they feel their children need. These parents would doubtlessly welcome the opportunity to make their own decision about what is best for their child.

Why not try a McKay experiment here in Massachusetts? Offer an "Abigail Adams" scholarship to parents of special education students, allowing them to choose a

different school to educate their child if they wanted. The scholarship would be for 90 percent of the total spent by the district to educate the child in the previous year, or the cost of the new program, whichever is less. This would give the districts a savings of 10 percent over the previous year's costs, and more importantly, give parents the freedom to choose the best educational setting for their child. This is the definition of a win/win situation. It's working in Florida. It could work in Massachusetts as well.

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