

# 'A Huge Breakthrough'

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by John Paulton

*School-choice champions win perhaps their biggest victory ever. How they did it shows how they might do it again.*

School-choice backers have made some gains over the years.

But never have they gotten a sweeping program passed into law on a statewide level—until now.

In February, Utah enacted a "universal" school-choice law that eventually will make vouchers available to virtually every child in the Beehive State beginning in August.

The law authorizes up to \$3,000 per child for low-income families and no less than \$500 per child for high-income families to send their children to any private or religious school they choose. Though it's only a first step toward true competition—the state spends nearly \$5,000 per public-school student—it is nonetheless "a huge breakthrough," Clint Bolick, president of the Alliance for School Choice, told the *Christian Science Monitor*.

"By 2020, every child in the state will have access to school choice," said Dan Lips, education analyst in Domestic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Existing voucher programs have been limited to individual cities—Milwaukee and Cleveland—or to special-needs students in Florida and Utah. So Utah's developments dismayed those who have long resisted school choice.

People for the American Way called the state House's approval of the program "a sad day for Utah students." Utahns for Public Schools, a group closely allied with the National Education Association, called it "the widest-ranging, most poorly regulated law of its kind in the country." And Carmen Snow, president of Utah's PTA, told the (Salt Lake) *Deseret Morning News*, "I just want to cry."

But the education establishment is more mad than sad. At presstime, the teachers union and its allies had collected the 92,000 signatures needed to force a statewide vote on the measure. State officials will decide whether the election occurs this year or next. And, if the public approves the program, a court challenge is probably not far behind.

Still, the way Utah voucher backers got so far already is both an inspiration and a role model for other pro-family efforts.

## **How to move forward**

The push for school choice in Utah began in the late 1990s—without much success. Teachers unions pressured an otherwise conservative state Legislature to ignore a bill in 2000 that would have established a tax credit for private school tuition. Not until five years later did such a bill reach the floor of the House for a full vote.

But school-choice advocates were unfazed by the early defeats. They followed a well-designed plan for progress:

**Incremental gains.** The Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship Act of 2005, named after an autistic student who attended a private school, gives vouchers to parents of special-needs children. By addressing one very specific need—an emotionally compelling one at that—the law helped legislators and the public see the issue in a different light. After all, if publicly funded vouchers could make a positive impact in the lives of special-needs students by giving them a choice, why wouldn't the same be true for all Utah students?

**Personal stories.** Children First Utah, a privately funded scholarship program for 375 low-income students, is in high demand; this year, officials received nearly 2,000 applications, even though the \$1,800 scholarships cover no more than half the actual tuition costs, and many participating parents take on extra jobs to fund their portion of tuition.

Elisa Peterson of Parents for Choice in Education—the group that has led the school choice fight in Utah—personalized the benefit of Children First Utah by telling the story of one mom who was desperately searching for alternatives for her son. He wasn't learning in the public schools and was failing in reading and math. Because of this scholarship, she was finally able to put him in a private school, where he improved greatly. The mother pays her half of tuition by cleaning bathrooms at the private school.

That type of story makes an impact, Peterson told *Citizen*.

"When the opposition says that low-income parents don't know what's best for their kids or that they're not willing to make sacrifices or that they don't know how to find a private school, we just pull out some of these families," Peterson said. "Look at these 375 families right here, and look at these 2,000 other families that want to make this choice."

**Talking points.** School-choice advocates hammered home the point that every child is different, and that no single system is going to serve all of those needs equally well. They also structured the voucher program to take away the opposition's best arguments.

For years, school-choice opponents in Utah and elsewhere have complained that vouchers would drain money from public schools. But the new program actually takes money from the state's general fund rather than the education fund. And when a student uses a voucher, it allows the local public school district to continue receiving funding for that student for up to five years.

**Sliding scale.** The bill's authors built in testing to determine the amount of the voucher for each student. This appealed to some moderate legislators who wanted to see the majority of the funding go to low- and middle-income families. At the same time, the program is "universal" by allowing even high-income families to get at least a \$500 voucher. Although there is a transition period for students who are already attending private schools, eventually all Utah students will be eligible for the voucher.

**Political muscle.** A key step in weakening opposition to parental choice was passage of Paycheck Protection legislation, which forbids the teachers' union from collecting money for political purposes without the express consent of the teacher. When Paycheck Protection took effect in Utah, funding to the teachers' union political action committee (PAC) plummeted by approximately 90 percent. "They took a serious hit," Peterson said. "It just shows you that when teachers have an option to contribute or not contribute to the political activities of their union, they're not interested."

Parents for Choice in Education formed its own PAC and raised more money than did the teachers' union in the 2006 election cycle.

"In the past, the teachers' union was the 800-pound gorilla in Utah education politics," Peterson said. "It was tough for most legislators to say, 'OK, I can support school choice, make the union mad at me, and there's no one there to defend me—or I can take the easy road and vote with the union. Our political action committee has really helped to balance out the political dynamic."

In no race did the PAC's investment make a greater difference than in the re-election campaign of House Speaker Greg Curtis, who won by 20 votes.

"A lot of people thought that he would be humbled by that experience and be less eager to take on a big issue like school choice," Peterson said. "But it was very much the contrary. He's a strong believer in this issue and felt like now's the time to get it done. If I can point to people who made this happen, certainly the speaker is at the top of that list. He was a real hero."

### ***What's next?***

The courage of Curtis may inspire lawmakers in other states to follow his example.

"People [around the country] are talking about this," Peterson said, "and they want to do something about it."

Polls back up that claim, according to Robert Fanger, public relations specialist for the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation.

Late-2006 surveys in Indiana, Missouri and New Hampshire "show higher public support for universal school choice as opposed to [merely] targeted" programs, Fanger told the newspaper *School Reform News*. "Now that Utah has proven universal choice can pass, there will be many more [proposals] on the horizon."

It won't be easy, Peterson tells those who want to know how they can repeat Utah's success, but it's well worth the effort.

"The thing that keeps you going in all of this—despite the power and the influence of the opposition—is knowing all those kids are out there who need this choice," Peterson said. "That's motivation enough."

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