

Frequently Asked Questions: Charters, Vouchers, and Public Schools

Excerpted from the Discussion Guide for the documentary film *Backpack Full of Cash*.

There are so many issues. What's most important?

Each school and district faces unique challenges. But ever since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the central question has been: How does this country confront our educational inequalities and provide equal opportunity for all?

It's not that our society doesn't know how to teach children, but that we do so unequally. It's not that we don't have good schools, but that they are clustered in affluent, predominantly white communities. It's not that we refuse to spend money on children, but that it is disproportionately spent on the already privileged.

Do we promote individualized choices that treat education as a consumer item, which in the long run will lower educational quality for schools and students that are struggling and thus deepen inequity? Or do we, as a society, commit to resolving our inequalities and to providing sufficient resources so that all children can attend high-quality public schools?

Why does the media keep saying our schools are "failing"?

Many of our schools face serious problems, especially in low-income communities of color. But in general, public schools in the United States are not "failing." In this era of alternative facts, we need to critically evaluate claims in both traditional and social media.

As one expert in the film notes, test scores are the highest ever for U.S. students, including Black and Latino students. Dropout rates are the lowest ever. Graduation rates are rising. Even in so-called failing schools and districts, there are exemplary teachers and schools. Even in so-called successful schools and districts, there are problematic teachers and schools.

A quarter century ago, reform focused on improving rather than labeling schools, and emphasized issues such as smaller class sizes, adequate and equitable funding, teacher experience, and a multicultural curriculum. The term "failing schools" was all but non-existent.



After the No Child Left Behind initiative of President George W. Bush, the term “failing schools” became especially popular, and was disproportionately applied to urban schools. The term was repeated so often that, before long, it became accepted truth. Privatizers then used the concept of “failing schools” to argue for charters and vouchers, especially in urban school systems.

Why focus on privatization? Shouldn't we focus on improving public schools?

We need to improve public schools, particularly to address the racial and economic inequities. But the philosophy of school privatization, which funnels public dollars into privately run schools, increasingly dominates policy initiatives. The appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, a fierce advocate of charters and vouchers, is a prime example.

Public schools need to be better, but if we do not defeat privatization—if our education system turns into nothing more than a “backpack full of cash” following each child—there may not be a public school system left to improve.

But still, our system of public education seems broken. Why not replace it?

Public schools have long been considered one of our democracy's most vital institutions. That is why every state constitution guarantees the right to a free and public education for all children, a guarantee not afforded other basics such as housing, healthcare, or adequate food and water. It's also noteworthy that most Americans say their local school and teachers are doing a good job, although they worry about the institution of public education overall.

Many of our democratic institutions appear broken—we face an erosion of voting rights, undue influence of money in politics, and extreme partisanship in our legislative bodies. But the task is to strengthen our democratic institutions, not abandon them.

As we talk of the various merits of public schools versus privatized solutions, keep in mind: Public school districts are the only institution in this country with the capacity, the commitment, and the legal obligation to educate all children.

Even if they are not “failing,” public schools are not models of equity. Why let them off the hook?

We agree. But the solution is not to follow the pressures of a marketplace ideology and encourage islands of consumer privilege within a sea of inequity.

We can't idealize our system of public schools. Too often, public schools are complicit in bolstering this country's divisions between the “haves” and “have-nots.” While privatization of our public schools exacerbates problems of inequality, that doesn't mean we can ignore problems within traditional public schools. We must never abandon the goal of equal educational opportunity for all, and must fight inequities wherever they occur.

At the same time, we must also defend the institution of public education. For all its flaws, public education is perhaps the most democratic of our institutions. It has done far more to address inequality, offer hope, and provide opportunity than the country's financial, economic, and political institutions. In the end, governmental oversight is still the only way to demand and help ensure educational equity.

We live in a capitalist country. Why not look to the free market for solutions?

Public schools certainly must follow sound financial practices and carefully spend their money. But as every parent knows, each child is unique. Schools are not factories. Churning out assembly-line widgets or relying on rote, computer-based learning is not the same as helping each child reach their potential both

as a student and as a human being. What's more, the marketplace inherently favors people with more money. Rich people can buy steak; poor people buy hamburger.

As Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, notes: "I've never in my entire life seen any evidence that the competitive free market, unrestricted, without a strong counterpoise within the public sector, will ever dispense decent medical care, sanitation, transportation or education to the people. It's as simple as that."

Some people argue that the real problem is segregated housing. Most children attend a public school in the neighborhood where they live.

Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are central problems in public education. But the courts and legislatures have made integrating U.S. schools, either racially or socio-economically, much harder in recent years.

The No Child Left Behind law also marked a dramatic change in federal education policy—away from its historic role of promoting access and equity, to establishing mandates promoting testing, charters, and privatization.

Some of the most significant gains in closing the achievement gap between whites and African Americans occurred as a result of desegregation. Yet in recent decades the courts have backed away from enforcing desegregation and many of the most promising efforts to promote integration and disperse concentrated poverty have faded. Reviving and expanding such initiatives should be a high priority for new school reform proposals.

Some charter schools are diverse and innovative. Isn't that good?

There is no one type of charter school, and some remain faithful to the original vision of charter school innovation, transparency, and collaboration with public schools. But increasingly, these schools are the



exception. As the Civil Rights Project at the University of California-Los Angeles [notes](#), “Though there are some remarkable and diverse charter schools, most are neither.”

The charter school *movement*, meanwhile, has aligned itself with a privatization philosophy that seeks to limit public accountability and transparency, that is not committed to serving all children, that reduces the role of families to individual consumers, and that diverts public dollars into privately run schools. It is this well-funded *movement* that is steering the national charter school discussion.

In addition, charter schools [tend to be hyper-segregated](#), facilitating rather than challenging our society’s return to educational apartheid.

If a school is educating a child, whether it’s a private school or a charter school, doesn’t it deserve public dollars?

Lack of adequate resources is one of the key problems facing public schools, particularly in low-income rural and urban communities. Voucher schemes and privately run charters make this problem worse.

Politicians rarely, if ever, talk about using charters or vouchers to increase the amount of money devoted to education. They are merely shifting money from public schools to privately run schools.

There is also the issue of public transparency and responsibility. The problem is especially acute in voucher schools, which are defined as “private” even if every single student is receiving a publicly funded voucher.

The public has few if any rights to know how their tax dollars are being spent at a private school. In essence, voucher schools are taxation without representation.

Affluent white people get to go to private schools. Don’t vouchers help poor students have the same chance?

In its early years, voucher advocates focused on low-income students, knowing that this was politically popular. But as the voucher movement has gained strength, it has expanded to include programs that provide tuition or tax benefits to middle-income or rich families.

Wisconsin, for instance, started the first contemporary voucher program in Milwaukee in 1990, and it served 300 low-income students. Today, Wisconsin has five different voucher schemes—including one that provides up to \$10,000 per child in tax deductions for all families, even billionaires.

It’s also important to remember that private schools can selectively serve students. Private voucher schools do not have to provide the same level of special education services, educate homeless children, provide bilingual language programs, or respect constitutional rights such as free speech or due process.

In the end, it’s the private school that chooses. It is the private school that decides which students to encourage to apply, which students to keep, which students to “counsel out,” which students to expel.

It’s no mere coincidence that the term “private” is often followed by the phrase, “Keep Out!” Private schools, like private roads and private country clubs, don’t have to answer to the public. That’s why they are called “private.”

But what about charter schools? Aren’t they considered public?

Charter schools are publicly funded but often privately run. For-profit charter schools, in particular, increasingly argue they are private operators and can

thus sidestep basic accountability requirements. They also have more leeway than traditional public schools to suspend, expel, or counsel out students.

Some charter schools aggressively push out students they deem undesirable. The Harlem Children's Zone, which has been a darling of the charter movement, once kicked out an entire class of middle school students because of their low test scores.

When students are expelled from charter or private schools, it becomes the responsibility of the public school district to educate the child. In this regard, public schools are this country's educational "home": the place where, when you knock on the door, they have to let you in.

I'm a parent. Why shouldn't I send my child to a charter or voucher school if it's a better fit?

We would never fault any parent who makes such a decision. Raising kids is hard, and parents do what parents are expected to do: They advocate for their child.

But policymakers have a different job. It is their responsibility to develop policies that balance competing interests and do what's best for all children.

We must resist public policies that privilege the choices of some parents while limiting the choices of others. The most heart-wrenching example, overturned by the *Brown* decision, was the system of Jim Crow schools in which the choices of white parents kept African American students in segregated and inferior schools.

We have choices in other areas of life. Why not in schools?

A concept as American as apple pie, individual choice has long been considered a component of liberty. In education, used appropriately, it can—and should—help ensure that public schools are sensitive to the varying needs of students, families, and communities.

Following the *Brown* decision, magnet schools, citywide specialty schools, and other forms of public school choice helped implement a collective responsibility to desegregate our schools and promote equal educational opportunity.

But just as the term "states' rights" was code in the 1960s for opposing federal civil rights legislation, today, "choice" has become code language. It is code for initiatives that funnel public tax dollars into private voucher schools or privately run charters. It is code for reforms based on markets and individual decisions by consumers.

Over time, the emphasis on individual, consumer choice has undermined the collective choice for public schools that serve all children.



For these reasons, many public school advocates refuse to use the term “choice” to describe voucher or charter school initiatives.

But don't vouchers help children escape “failing” public schools?

In many programs, the children receiving vouchers did not come from a public school—they were either first entering school or were already attending the private school. Even if the focus is on students in public schools when voucher programs first start, that can easily change.

The overwhelming majority of private schools in this country are religious, as are the majority of voucher schools. Most parents choose a private school for reasons of religion, not academic achievement.

Religion is a profoundly private matter, and people have the right to a private religious education. But that does not mean the public should pay for it—especially when private religious schools promote church doctrine that may be at odds with public policy, for instance that birth control is wrong, or that homosexuality is a sin.

When put to a popular vote, voucher programs have repeatedly been rejected. In Michigan, the home state of Betsy DeVos, voters twice rejected referenda promoted by DeVos, by more than 2-1 margins.

Do tax dollars for religious schools violate the separation of church and state?

In 2002, in a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Cleveland voucher program including religious schools did not violate the federal separation of church and state, in part because parents could choose between various options, making it a private decision.

The decision did not prohibit Cleveland-like voucher programs. But it did not mandate them, leaving such

decisions to the states. A majority of state constitutions have a far stronger wall than Ohio when it comes to separating public funding and religious education.

The U.S. Supreme Court debate took place in the context of an increasingly powerful privatization movement, whose rhetoric was accepted as fact. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, for example, wrote in his majority decision that the Cleveland program was an attempt “to provide educational opportunities to the children of a failed school district.”

Some people say that allowing public dollars for private and charter schools is a civil rights issue, and I support civil rights.

Education has long been a focus of movements for racial justice and equal opportunity—from the fight against Jim Crow segregated schools, to educating students with special education needs, protecting the right of undocumented children to attend public schools, defending gender equality, and protecting LGBTQ rights.

These struggles have centered on public schools, which, as public entities, are subject to democratic oversight and must respect basic constitutional rights; this is not the case with private schools.

Forces of privatization have tried to claim the mantle of civil rights, but it has been a tortured argument. Charter and voucher programs ultimately are about limiting the right to a free and public education, a right enshrined in every state constitution in the country. In addition, charter and voucher schools have exacerbated the return to segregated schooling, further undermining the promise of the *Brown* decision.

Today, civil rights organizations are increasingly defending the right to a public education. The recent platform of the Movement for Black Lives,

for instance, takes a strong stand against school privatization. The NAACP, in a resolution passed in the fall of 2016, called for a moratorium on charter school expansion and for strengthening public oversight of charter schools.

Isn't it true that charters and vouchers outperform public schools?

There are high-performing public schools, private schools, and charter schools. But the rhetorical promise of the charter and voucher movements—that they would use free-market principles of choice and competition to spur increased academic achievement for all—has proven false. Overall, studies have shown that voucher and charter schools do not outperform public schools.

We also need to keep in mind that defining academic achievement is too often limited to fill-in-the-blank standardized tests. But researchers have long noted that an over-reliance on standardized tests can distort student learning and exacerbate inequities facing low-income students and students of color.

Relying on high-stakes standardized tests also limits our vision of what is a good education. If you were to describe the ideal school for your child, would standardized tests be at the top of the requirements?

In the end, charters and vouchers are not about improving academic performance. They are about funneling public dollars into privately run schools. As the filmmakers of *Backpack Full of Cash* note, in their five years of making the film, their fundamental concern did not change: Why dismantle our public school system? Instead, why not make it work for every child?

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Resources

School Privatization

[ALEC Exposed](#) A website dedicated to exposing the American Legislative Exchange Council. Check out their [page on school privatization](#).

[Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools](#) (AROS) An alliance of parent, youth, community, and labor organizations that represent more than 7 million people. Organizes nationwide days of action to reclaim the promise of public education as our nation's gateway to a strong democracy and racial and economic justice.

[American Civil Liberties Union](#) Works to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States.

[American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT) At local and national levels this teachers union works to promote public schools and to stop privatization.

[Alternet Education Page](#) Numerous articles on school privatization from around the country.

[Badass Teachers Association](#) (BATs) A network of over 80,000 teachers and education activists throughout the United States who fight for communities to have strong, sustainable, and well-funded public schools.

[Black Lives Matter's Statement](#) on "An End to the Privatization of Education and Real Community Control."

[Center for Popular Democracy](#) Works with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions to envision and win an innovative pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda. Check out these [education publications](#).

[Economic Policy Institute](#) A nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank created to include the needs of low- and middle-income workers in economic policy discussions. See their "[Exploring the Consequences of Charter School Expansion](#)."

[Education Commission of the States](#) ECS conducts research, delivers reports, and provides expert counsel on the full spectrum of education policy issues—from early learning through postsecondary and workforce readiness.

[Education Law Center of NJ](#) Education Law Center

(ELC) serves as a leading voice for New Jersey's public school children and is one of the most effective advocates for equal educational opportunity and equitable school funding in the United States. See [Is School Funding Fair?](#)

[Education for Liberation](#) National coalition of teachers, community activists, researchers, youth, and parents who believe a good education should teach people—particularly low-income youth and youth of color—how to understand and challenge the injustices their communities face. Organizes "Free Minds Free People" conference.

[In the Public Interest](#) A research and policy center on privatization and responsible contracting. It has issued several reports on dangers of school privatization.

[Journey for Justice \(J4J\)](#) An alliance of grassroots community, youth, and parent-led organizations in 21 cities across the country pushing back and demanding community-driven alternatives to the privatization of public schools systems. See [Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures and Public School Sabotage](#).

[The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) NAACP, the oldest civil rights organization in the United States. The fundamental goal of the NAACP's education advocacy agenda is to provide all students access to quality education. [NAACP Resolution and statement on charter schools](#).

[National Center for Education Statistics](#) Collects data from many sources covering all areas of education. See the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports.

[National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education](#) Provides nonpartisan documentation and analysis of privatization in education.

[National Education Association](#) (NEA) On local, state, and national levels, this teachers union works to improve and defend public schools.

[National Education Policy Center](#) Sponsors research, produces policy briefs, and publishes expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. A great place to find responses to pro-privatization reports.

[National School Board Association](#) NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. It believes "education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people."

[Network for Public Education](#) (NPE) An advocacy group whose mission is to preserve, promote, improve, and strengthen public schools. Check out their “[NPE Toolkit: School Privatization Explained](#).”

[Opportunity to Learn Network](#) A national network working to secure a high-quality public education for all students.

[Parents Across America](#) A grassroots organization that connects parents from around the United States to strengthen and support public schools.

[Parents for Public Schools](#) A non-profit organization of parent leaders who work to improve public schools by educating, engaging, and mobilizing parents across the country.

[Progressive Magazine’s “Public School Shakedown”](#)

[Rethinking Schools](#) Publisher of quarterly magazine and books that oppose school privatization and promote high-quality public schools and teaching for social justice.

[Right to Education Project](#) Tracks international developments in the fight against privatization and promotion of public schools.

[TAG Teachers4SocialJustice](#) A coalition of 10 social justice teacher groups that hold conferences and organize for educational justice in major cities. URLs of local groups listed.

NOTE: The two following organizations promote privatization but have extensive information about voucher and charter programs.

[EdChoice](#) Promotes school privatization. Their annual report *ABCs of School Choice* has comprehensive information on school privatization programs and legislation by state.

[National Charter School Resource Center](#) A pro-charter school clearinghouse that has information on charter school legislation. Their listing of charter schools does not distinguish between those chartered by local school districts (in which employees are public employees) and privately run charter schools.

Community Schools

[Coalition for Community Schools](#) An alliance of national, state, and local organizations in education K-16, youth development, community planning and development, family support, health and human services, government,

and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community school networks.

[National Center for Community Schools](#) The Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools is a practice-based technical assistance organization that builds the capacity of schools, districts, and community partners to organize their human and financial resources around student success.

Standardized Testing Issues

[Defending the Early Years](#) An organization of early childhood educators and advocates who rally educators to take action on policies that impact the education of young children, especially around testing and standards.

[FairTest National Center for Fair and Open Testing](#) Excellent materials in English and Spanish on alternative forms of assessment and problems with standardized testing.

[Learning Policy Institute](#) Works on a range of policy issues, particularly assessment.

[NY Performance Standards Consortium](#) A network of schools using high-quality assessment alternatives to standardized testing.

[Rethinking Schools](#) Articles in their quarterly magazine and on their website critique standardized testing and offer suggestions for authentic forms of assessment. See their book [Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools](#).

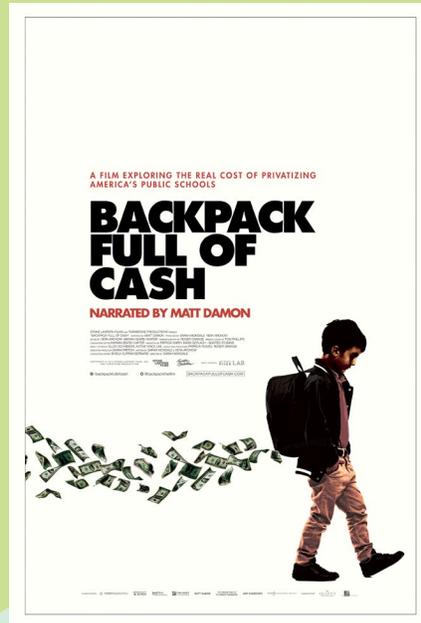
Philadelphia-based Groups

[Education Law Center of Pennsylvania](#) The ELC-PA’s mission is to ensure access to a quality public education for all children in Pennsylvania.

[Juntos](#) A community-led, Latinx immigrant organization in South Philadelphia fighting for our human rights as workers, parents, youth, and immigrants.

[Youth United for Change](#) A youth-led, democratic organization made up of youth of color and working-class communities, with the “people” and political power to hold school officials and government accountable to meeting the educational needs of Philadelphia public school students.

[Philadelphia Student Union](#) Runs city-wide campaigns that bring together students from all of their chapters and additional schools to improve school district policies and practices.



www.backpackfullofcash.com

For a downloadable PDF of these Frequently Asked Questions and/or the complete Discussion Guide, visit Rethinking Schools at www.rethinkingschools.org.

This Q&A was written by Rethinking Schools in collaboration with Stone Lantern Films and Turnstone Productions, with project funding by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. It was produced in August 2017 as part of a Discussion Guide for the film *Backpack Full of Cash*, a new documentary narrated by Matt Damon.

Backpack Full of Cash looks at how charter schools, vouchers, and the privatization movement are threatening our public schools. Filmed in Philadelphia, Nashville, New Orleans, and other cities, the film talks with parents, teachers, activists, policy analysts, and students who are fighting for quality public schools for all children.

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