

# Private schools allowed to pick and choose students

■ What happens to the students left behind?

Linda was the only child I knew of in our community who did not attend our neighborhood public school - Fort Wayne's Justin N. Study School. Linda attended the religious school located just two blocks from our public school.

Someone spread the word that Linda's school was better than our school because it was a religious school. I was about Linda's age, and I did not like that rumor.

Years passed. And then one day I returned to Justin N. Study School as a first grade teacher. Two teachers from my childhood days were still there. They were

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surprised to see me, and they were kind and supportive.

I got acquainted with Mrs. Ricks. She was the school's liaison officer and a wealth of information. One day Mrs. Ricks pointed out a student who was transferring to the religious school two blocks away. "Don't worry," she said. "He'll be back."

Mrs. Ricks assured me that the religious school would send him back to us - the public school - if he didn't "behave himself." In a

matter of weeks, he was back! And that was my introduction to a certain kind of school choice where a school can choose the students it will tolerate.

Nowadays, "School Choice" is an emotional topic with "hot button" words like charter schools (independent public schools), private scholarships, universal vouchers, religious and private schools. Opponents of school choice say money is drained away from the public schools. School choice advocates say the best way to fix current educational problems is by way of the religious and private schools.

To be honest, not all religious and private schools are good or excellent. And not all public schools are bad. It should be pointed out, however, that religious and private schools are the

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luckiest schools because they can screen their students.

George W. Bush and Al Gore both claim they want to be the "Education President." Although neither will admit it, they both are proposing very similar school choice options. But neither candidate is addressing the nation-

wide shortage of teachers and administrators. How can school choice options be put into practice if there are not enough teachers, principals and superintendents?

Will either presidential candidate guarantee students with special needs equal access to school choice options? Will charter schools, religious and private schools open their doors to students with autism spectrum disorder, communication disorder, dual sensory impairment, hearing or visual impairment, the emotionally handicapped, mentally disabled and the traumatic brain injured?

Both presidential candidates need to engage in an honest discussion about the limitations of school choice. They also need to have in mind good alternative

plans in case their present proposals to fix education fail.

There is a limited amount of local and state tax monies spent for universal vouchers, so what happens to the students who can't get vouchers to attend the schools of their choice? Charter schools have limited enrollments, so what happens to the students on their waiting lists? Private scholarships pay 50 per cent of the tuition to a private school, parents pay the other half. What happens to students whose parents don't have the matching funds?

In short, what happens to the students who are left out, who are left behind? True, it is expensive to educate all students. But, it may be more expensive not to.

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