

PERSPECTIVE

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Providing school choices key to advancing state

From day one, our administration has been focused on advancing ideas that are all about making South Carolina more competitive.

Whether it's cutting income taxes for small businesses, passing a long-overdue lawsuit reform package, or finding millions of dollars in taxpayer savings in our executive budgets, we've had a number of key successes on that front. Simply put, I believe becoming more competitive means pushing for reforms that are consistent with market principles, common sense and fiscal responsibility.

When it comes to making our state more competitive and more successful in the education arena, I have always firmly believed that giving parents more choices in the marketplace is critical. I am more convinced of that than ever after having seen firsthand how choice turned thousands of young lives around in places like Milwaukee and Cleveland. We owe it to those kids whose needs for whatever reason aren't being met by their current school to at

least explore how these success stories might be duplicated here in South Carolina.

It's important because at the end of the day, school choice is not just about its impact on those thousands of individual lives, but the fact that it has been instrumental in improving public education wherever it's been tried. Take Milwaukee, which saw its public school enrollment, graduation rate, per-pupil funding and test results all go up after school choice was implemented there. The only thing that dropped over that same period was the dropout rate!

There will always be differences of opinion in the General Assembly about the notion of school choice. Regrettably, last session, the General Assembly narrowly defeated a broad-based school choice proposal that would have greatly expanded educational options in our state. While differences of opinion are a normal part of the legislative process, let me be perfectly clear about my opinion: As long as there are individual South Carolina school

By Gov. Mark Sanford

Summary

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When will Kentucky Gov. Ernie Fletcher provide strong leadership in favor of school choice? Other governors, including South Carolina's Mark Sanford, recognize that school choice will make their states more competitive.

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"Our one-size-fits-all approach to education hasn't gotten us where we need to be, and I firmly believe we must try something new – something that's worked in other states – for the students who need it most."

kids whose needs are not being met by the current system, I will continue to push for more choices. Period. That includes public school choice, charter school reform, help for parents who home-school their kids, and yes, tax credits and scholarships for our most at-risk schoolchildren.

The question at hand simply becomes what form of school choice is most attainable within the current General Assembly. Getting a charter school reform bill through the legislative process is likely going to be much easier than getting

a tax credit bill through next year. My goal is to expand choices for parents as widely possible as soon as possible because we cannot accept the status quo for yet another year.

Last week, our public schools got their report cards. Sadly, the results showed 284 failing or below-average schools. To put that number in human terms, that's one out of every five school kids and one out of every four public schools. Add to this the disappointing fact that nearly 40 per-

cent of our schools showed worse ratings than they did the year before. If South Carolina expects to be competitive in a 21st century, this has to change.

Part of the equation for turning things around is obviously money, and working with the General Assembly, we fully funded the Base Student Cost last year for the first time in five years. But an equally important part of the equation is expanding access to real, accountable, market-based education choices.

We can – and should – have a legitimate discussion on how to best implement broad school choice so that every parent can choose the best option for each child. Our one-size-fits-all approach to education hasn't gotten us where we need to be, and I firmly believe we must try something new – something that's worked in other states – for the students who need it most.

I'm open to any new idea that will move our schools forward, but rest assured I'm more convinced now than ever that a big part of that solution lies in expanding access to additional educational choices.

– This article by South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford is reprinted with permission.

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