



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on September 27, 2012

How Independent Are Private Schools?

More and more parents are looking for alternatives to the public schools, which are producing high rates of student failure. Is it because of the students or the school? At a recent conference on education sponsored by the *New York Times*, one of the participants, Pedro Noguera, a professor of education at Columbia University, jolted the audience by saying, "We have set some schools up for failure." No attempt was made to elaborate on Professor Noguera's comment, but he was expressing a view that is commonly held by many parents in districts where the schools have specialized in producing failure. Many of these parents have been trying to find alternatives to these schools that they can afford.



That is why the Charter School is usually the parent's first choice. According to Wikipedia:

Charter schools are [primary](#) or [secondary schools](#) that receive [public money](#) (and like other schools, may also receive private [donations](#)) but are not subject to some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other [public schools](#) in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each school's [charter](#).... Where enrollment in a charter school is oversubscribed, admission is frequently allocated by [lottery](#)-based admissions systems. However, the lottery is open to all students.... As of September 2012, in the United States, the only school system with the majority of children educated in charter schools was the [New Orleans Public Schools](#).

Another alternative offered parents are Tuition Tax Credits, which makes private education affordable for many parents. According to the National Conferences of State Legislatures:

As of May 2012, 13 tuition tax credit programs exist in 10 states. These programs, also known as scholarship tax credit programs, allow individuals and corporations to allocate a portion of their owed state taxes to private nonprofit school tuition organizations that issue scholarships to K-12 students. The scholarship allows a student to choose among a list of private schools, and sometimes public schools outside of the district, approved by the school tuition organization. The scholarship is used to pay tuition, fees, and other related expenses. As a result, the state does not have to appropriate per-pupil education funding for those students that receive scholarships.

This system actually helps a state save education costs, since the tuition of a private school is less than the per-pupil cost in a public school.

A third alternative is the voucher plan. In it, parents receive a voucher as tuition to a public or private school. The school then takes this voucher to the agency that issued it and is paid the stated amount. According to a critic of the voucher plan, religious schools might be required to adopt certain unreligious programs:



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Would a school be permitted to cash vouchers if that school promoted teachings contrary to the government policy, such as artificial birth prevention or abortion? Could a school with an “inadequate” sex-education program cash vouchers? Given the temper of the times, one would think that “accreditation” for participation would not come cheaply.

The problem can be stated thus: if you take government money, you must follow government regulations. And if you want your school to be free of government interference, you’d better not take government money. In other words, “he who pays the piper calls the tune.” Steven Yates wrote several years ago:

Many libertarians cannot contain their enthusiasm over the Supreme Court’s decision last Thursday in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*. This 5-4 decision allows Cleveland, Ohio parents to use federal education money, otherwise known as vouchers, to send their children to private (and religiously-based) as well as public schools. It has been described as a major victory for school choice. Some writers are even comparing this decision to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*....

We absolutely must realize that *with government money comes government control*. Home school and private Christian school advocate Rev. E. Ray Moore of the [Exodus Mandate project](#), in his just-published book [Let My Children Go](#), makes this point forcefully in a section entitled “Vouchering Toward Gomorrah.” Rev. Moore argues that vouchers threaten the autonomy of private Christian schools. Citing Marshall Fritz, he singles out three problems with the voucher idea. First, vouchers help trivialize private education by making it easier to obtain.... Second, private religious schools will eventually be compelled to accept every student whose parents present the voucher. Thus they lose control of their admissions policies and find themselves facing many of the same troublesome students that subsist in the government schools.

Even the Anti-Defamation League is critical of vouchers, but for different reasons than those stated by Yates:

Superficially, school vouchers might seem a relatively benign way to increase the options poor parents have for educating their children. In fact, vouchers pose a serious threat to values that are vital to the health of American democracy. These programs subvert the constitutional principle of separation of church and state and threaten to undermine our system of public education.

In other words, the only way to preserve the independence of private education is to stay away from government funding, particularly at the federal level. Even private colleges are threatened with government control if they accept students with government-guaranteed student loans. That is why Hillsdale College will not accept any student with a federally guaranteed student loan. The Hillsdale online catalog states:

Hillsdale College, which does not accept or permit its students to bring federal financial aid to campus, is fully committed to providing its students with competitive financial aid packages, all of which are privately funded. Financial aid can be need-based (grants and loans), or it can be awarded without regard to financial need, as many scholarships are.

By rejecting any government funds, either directly or indirectly, Hillsdale has been able to maintain its independence as a conservative education institution. This is very important in this era of government intrusion into just about anything that even smells of government funding.

Patrick Henry College also steers clear of government money for obvious reasons. Its online catalog states:



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The Office of Scholarship and Financial Aid's purpose is to assist students and families in understanding the financial process and to help them find ways to fund their education at PHC. [The Associate Director of Financial Aid provides] counsel concerning the financial aid process, including eligibility requirements for merit and need-based scholarships. The College awards over \$2,500,000 in financial assistance annually to help qualified students attend PHC.

That is how Patrick Henry College is able to maintain its independence, particularly its ability to choose those students who would benefit most from their academic programs.

Grove City College, in Pennsylvania, is another college that rejects any kind of federal funding. Its online catalog states:

Although Grove City College does not participate in federal financial aid programs, many state grant and scholarship programs can be used to assist students of the College. Students should check with their high school guidance office or the State Higher Education Assistance Agency or the Board of Regents in their state concerning state aid that may be available. Any state grants that are funded with federal funds are not accepted at Grove City College.

In other words, it's federal dollars that must be rejected if a college is to maintain its independence. The U.S. Supreme Court made that quite clear when it ruled in March 1984 that private schools are subject to government regulations if they enroll students who receive tuition money from the government. Even though the money goes directly to individual students, not the school, the Court said that any scholarships, loans, or grants to students "constitute federal financial assistance."

Traditionally, private schools have referred to themselves as independent schools because of their freedom from government control. Of course, the elite prep schools for the wealthy don't need government tuition assistance. But, apparently, our great prestigious, ivy-league universities will accept students with federally guaranteed loans, even though they must then accept government regulations. For example, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Equal Opportunity in Education Act, has forced many schools to adopt new standards in college sports requiring females to be given equal opportunities with males in college sports.

In the article "Title IX and Its Negative Impact on Male Collegiate Sports in the United States," Yahoo.com states:

Due to the wording of title IX, which puts emphasis on the equal amount of money universities must spend on its male and female athletic programs, university officials have no choice but to cut men's athletic programs to stay within the budget. Men's wrestling has been the biggest victims of these cutbacks due to Title IX. Over the past twenty years, the number of college wrestling programs has decreased from over 600 to 225. The state of Utah alone has 3500 high school wrestlers, but until Utah Valley State College added a wrestling program in September 2002, these wrestlers had to go out of state to continue their wrestling careers.

What is the solution for this problem? If you want independence, stay away from federal funding. But what if we got the federal government out of the education business? Would that restore the independence of private education? That would mean ending federal guarantees of student loans, an unlikely development.

The best model for independent education is the one set by Hillsdale College. They've shown how it can be done. And the reason why they've been so successful is that they offer a superior academic program. But with the new online technology, distance-learning programs by universities may also provide the



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way to independence in education.



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