

The Impact of Advocacy Funding on the School Choice Debate

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Executive Summary

A contentious movement for school choice has advanced to the forefront of education debates in the past few decades. Broadly speaking, the movement promises to expand education alternatives in both private and public schools to allow parents to choose the type of schooling they believe appropriate for their children. Prominent forms of school choice include vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, interdistrict choice, and intradistrict choice. Each type of school choice has its own set of advocates and opponents, but also shares some of the same key players.

This policy brief examines some of the major funding sources of this movement and their potential impact on policy. While some data—such as contributions from individuals and local unions—are not included because of the lack of access to information, this snapshot of major grants and contributors is revealing. Funding sources for both advocates and opposing forces are examined. Data were drawn from several sources, including individual websites of foundations and other organizations; informational databases of foundations and of grant recipients; and foundations' tax filings, which list their dispersals. This policy brief also explores strategies funders use to reach the media, policy makers, and the public in their efforts to promote or impede the school choice movement.

Key findings include the following:

- *A small number of funders provides the majority of the funding for the school choice debate.* In the past two decades, more than half of the total amount granted to think tanks promoting school choice came from only three foundations. In 2005, among funds provided for activities relative to K-12 education, 84% of the amount funded for school choice came from only two foundations.
- *There are more school choice supporters than opponents making generous donations.* At least six foundations have made notable contributions supporting school choice. In comparison, only two key funders have supported oppositional efforts.
- *The funding of school choice supporters is higher than the funding of those against school choice.* In 2005, for example, the top two funders supporting school choice efforts provided \$87,782,260 more than the top two funders opposing school choice, or 21 times as much.

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Therefore, it is recommended that:

- Policy makers, media, and the public become aware of relationships between donors and recipients—of who receives money from whom, and for what purposes.
- Policy analysts and other stakeholders be proactive in educating their general audiences about research quality issues, including potential sources of bias and the importance of peer review—or its absence.

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Introduction

School choice has sparked a contentious movement that has advanced to the forefront of education debates in the past few decades. Broadly speaking, the movement promises to expand education alternatives in both private and public schools to allow parents to choose the type of schooling they believe most appropriate for their children. Prominent forms of school choice include vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, interdistrict choice, and intradistrict choice.

Many constituencies have voiced their views, sometimes in support, sometimes in opposition, and sometimes in an effort to shape specific policy. Yet, behind the large numbers of voices are a few key players whose influence may be more substantive than many suspect. Simply put, those devoting a large amount of money to the issue are the ones who may ultimately wield the most power over policy. Most notable among these are philanthropists who have strategized to promote school choice by funding free-market think tanks that frequently issue supportive reports.

In this brief, the funding sources of school choice advocates and opponents and their potential impact on policy are examined. In addition, the strategies funders use to promote or oppose the school choice movement are explored.

Data Sources and Methodology

Funding data were compiled from a combination of sources: foundation and organizational websites, foundations' grant recipient databases, and tax filings listing foundation contributions.^{1, 2, 3} Methodology was drawn from the work of Hassel and Way.⁴ Data from the Foundation Center⁵ for 2005, the most recent year for which information was available, were analyzed to determine top funders targeting the issue of school choice, and supplemented with results retrieved from Guidestar's database.^{6, 7} Both grants that supported efforts to influence policy and grants made to directly support school choice practitioners are included. As a base for calculating the contributions of each of the top foundations in support of pro- or anti-choice efforts, 990-PF forms (which record individual donations as line items) filed with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2005 were used.⁸ Similarly, as a base

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for calculating contributions from national teachers' unions, LM-2 reports⁹ recording unions' income and expenses were used.¹⁰

Analysis of the data involved several challenges. First, it was difficult to determine what to include as school choice funding. When filing tax forms, organizations must list their grant recipients and funding amounts, but they do not need to provide any additional information, such as specifics on how the funding will be used. Due to the large number of grants made (especially by top funders such as the Walton Family Foundation [Walton] and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [Gates]), it was not always possible to determine whether a given grant's purpose was intended to support or oppose school choice. Therefore, criteria for which monies to include in these calculations were developed. Figures reported here include only recipients who: (1) have an identifiable choice-related word in their name, (2) have such a word in the description of their grant (when descriptions were available), or (3) are recognized as an advocate for or opponent of school choice (unions or specific think tanks, for example). Groups that actually are involved in the choice debate may have been excluded if their names give no indication of their commitment. Moreover, the full amount of a grant was included in cases where it was not possible to determine whether all or only part of the grant was actually used for choice activities. As a result of inexactness in available records, then, it is likely that results reported here are similarly inexact, although they are representative.

Another analytical challenge was that some contributions were made to advocacy groups while others were made directly to school choice practitioners—substantively different strategies. The latter group consists primarily of grants to help start charter schools or to fund private voucher programs. To acknowledge the difference, results for each group are separately calculated and reported. While this brief is most concerned with funding that advances competing policy agendas, direct support for practitioners is included because successful choice schools are powerful arguments for further choice development. From a political analysis standpoint, however, these donations are qualitatively different from those donations intended to directly influence the media or policy makers, and so they are separately categorized.

Other choices affecting the results involved the elimination of some other possible funding. Specifically, foundations with revenues below \$25,000 were excluded from the analysis because they do not have to file 990-PF forms. In addition, grants awarded to private schools, which sometimes but not always indicate support for school choice, were disregarded. Further, since tax-exempt foundations are allowed only limited involvement in political activities, some philanthropists no doubt donated their own money to political campaigns in support of certain stances on the choice issue. However, such contributions are beyond the scope and intent of this analysis, so personal donations from philanthropists were excluded.

Predominant Views on School Choice

Who Supports Choice?

Although the school choice controversy cannot be easily split along partisan lines,¹¹ it still can be loosely characterized by two core orientations.¹² In rough outline, school choice is supported by those who advocate market-oriented reforms for public education. These advocates generally believe that the public school system is too rigid, unaccountable, and bureaucratic, and that it has been generally unsuccessful.¹³ Nobel Laureate economist Milton Friedman, who was a strong believer in the power of the marketplace, was the original architect of the market approach to education.¹⁴ Those with a core free-market philosophy tend to be the strongest supporters of school choice, arguing that a competitive system will lead to the improvement (or dissolution) of public school systems.¹⁵ Many do not want to invest more money in existing public schools, but are interested instead in new structural reforms such as charter schools as a way to improve the national education system.¹⁶

Below this surface distinction, however, differences among advocates, and funders, emerge. Individual choice options each have their own advocates, who may be drawn from a variety of groups. For example, the Milwaukee voucher plan was supported by some liberal black Democrats as well as conservative white Republicans.¹⁷ And, as Sugarman and Kemerer note, “Although vouchers are often characterized as a conservative or libertarian and Republican idea, certain regulated school voucher plans have won the support of some Democrats who think of themselves as progressives.”¹⁸ Despite such variation, and in part because then-president Ronald Reagan supported the voucher idea in its infancy, the voucher concept has gained a Republican label.¹⁹ Furthermore, many continue to associate it with the Republican party because of support from several 2008 Republican presidential candidates, including Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Fred Thompson.²⁰ However strong the Republican label, the reality is that voucher supporters come from widely varied political quarters because many believe vouchers are a reform that will help low-income students escape failing schools.²¹

Charter schools receive support from other types of advocates, including those who support *public* school choice, but not privatization.²² For some, charter schools as public schools are a less extreme reform than vouchers.²³ For example, the Gates Foundation, one of the top funders of school choice initiatives, supports charters but not vouchers.²⁴ Similarly, policy makers such as former President Bill Clinton and former Education Secretary Richard Riley support charters even though they have opposed vouchers.²⁵

A number of supporters of home schooling believe that public schools are socialist and undermine American individualism.²⁶ Key advocates, such as the Home School Legal Defense Association

(HSLDA), are also often closely allied with conservative and fundamentalist Christian organizations and individuals. In fact, the Home School Foundation, which HSLDA founded to assist home-schooling families and promote home schooling, sponsors several funds, many indicating an overt Christian affiliation.²⁷ However, home schoolers also now include families pursuing progressive education.²⁸ Parents tend to be the strongest advocates of home schooling, perhaps because they must accept an extremely active role in their children's education. In general, home schooling is most supported by parents who want to control their children's curriculum and avoid the bureaucratic public school system.²⁹

Cyber schools, providing instruction online, share some commonalities with both charter schools and home schooling. Some parents home school their children via Internet courses, so home-schooling parents may also be cyber school supporters. Cyber schools may be sponsored by public districts, or by for-profit companies. For example, K¹² Inc., an organization founded by former Secretary of Education William Bennett, has created and marketed an online curriculum to home schoolers.³⁰

It is more difficult to characterize supporters of interdistrict and intradistrict choice options, largely because they have received little attention from either advocates or opponents of school choice. In competitive choice environments (and like some charter schools), districts sometimes create a school or schools around curricular or pedagogical themes (Montessori or Core Knowledge, for example). Some of these public school choice programs were originally designed to combat segregation by appealing to a wide variety of families. However, voluntary racial constraints were struck down recently by the U.S. Supreme Court and the impact of that decision remains to be seen.³¹ Generally, however, it seems likely that those who support public school choice like new charter schools may be as comfortable, or perhaps even more comfortable, supporting interdistrict and intradistrict choice.³²

Who Opposes Choice?

Organized supporters of the public school system (for example, teachers' unions, Parent Teacher Associations, school boards, the Council of Great City Schools, and the Council of Chief State School Officers), advocacy groups (such as Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, People For the American Way [PFAW], and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]), school administration organizations, progressive foundations, and some academics often oppose school vouchers but take more nuanced positions on other forms of school choice. Their opposition is strongest when a given policy is perceived as threatening the health or survival of the public schools.³³ Choice opponents generally contend that free-market mechanisms have unintended consequences when applied to American

education. In particular, many argue that school choice can exacerbate the inequalities in education, through the “skimming” of higher-scoring students and increased segregation. They also suggest that new inequities will result from the fact that parents have disparate abilities to make informed decisions.³⁴ For example, a non-English-speaking parent unfamiliar with American schools would be less well-equipped to make an informed decision than a parent fluent in English and experienced with schools.

Many oppose private school vouchers because they endorse the tradition and concept of the public school as open to all, funded by public dollars and democratically governed. Like Horace Mann, called by some the “father of education,” they believe public schools are necessary to promote a common curriculum and a common philosophy—and to nurture an “American” identity.³⁵ Teachers’ unions and others have argued vigorously against voucher initiatives based in part on an expressed concern that they would funnel resources away from the public schools.³⁶ Still other voucher opponents worry about lack of accountability for public dollars channeled into private schools. Others, including Protestant and Jewish organizations, oppose support for private religious-affiliated schools based on church-state separation principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Teachers’ unions also have raised concerns about charter schools, especially when the playing field has not been perceived as level in terms of standards of performance. Moreover, since charter school teachers in some states do not have to join collective bargaining units,³⁷ these unions lose dues and political influence.³⁸

As is true for other types of school choice, public school advocates are generally against home schooling. The National Education Association (NEA), for example, has expressed serious concerns about home schooling, asserting that unlike public schools, “home-schooling programs cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience.”³⁹ As with vouchers, home schooling defies the tradition of the public school system and tosses out some of the original reasons for schooling, such as fostering a common system of morals, culture, and community.⁴⁰ Some also feel that home schooling, like other forms of school choice, adds to the problem of education inequality, since families who choose to home school are usually of middle to upper income with two parents, so that one parent can stay at home to school their children; the worry is again that they will drain off resources needed by public schools to educate less-privileged students.⁴¹ Many groups pose similar objections to cyber schools. Concerns have also arisen about quality in cyber schools, as well as instances of fraud. In fact, some state teachers’ unions have filed lawsuits against charter cyber schools, arguing that some are not using certified teachers as required by law.⁴²

Many opponents of choice reject even interdistrict and intradistrict choice plans, including magnet schools. Although many such plans grew

out of a desire to further integration, they have not always been successful. For example, some African-Americans intended to benefit from choice have felt unwelcome at predominantly white schools, with the result that segregation remained or intensified.⁴³ Furthermore, like other choice options, open enrollment plans, by “skimming” high-achieving students, can increase education inequalities and possible stratification by race and socioeconomic status. Unequal resources in different schools and districts also compound the equity issue.⁴⁴

Advocacy Favoring School Choice

Major philanthropic funders, identified below, offer substantive financial support to school choice advocacy, much of it to support vouchers and charter schools.⁴⁵ Other supporters contribute in ways other than funding. Think tanks and advocacy organizations sponsor and promote research reports that support their position, and they work to influence politicians and policy.

Key Players

Philanthropists. According to Hess, a handful of funders provided more than half the total philanthropy relative to K-12 education in 2002, resulting in a small number of funders wielding a large amount of influence.⁴⁶ Similarly, a small core group supported school choice, spending millions of dollars doing so.⁴⁷ Many assert that it is difficult to make dramatic changes in education, but school choice as a reform strategy has exploded, due in part to the financial support it has received from key foundations. From 1993-2003, the number of children who chose to attend schools other than their assigned schools increased from 8.6 million to 12.5 million.⁴⁸ In this same time period, the majority of states (38 out of the 40 states that currently allow charter schools) adopted charter school laws, and the number of home schoolers tripled (from 345,000 to 1,100,000 students).⁴⁹ In 2006, seven states⁵⁰ created or expanded private school choice options.⁵¹ It is safe to assume that the school choice movement would not have grown so quickly without these funders’ donations to free-market think tanks and associations supporting school choice. Many organizations depend on these large contributions for survival. For example, in 2003, the National Charter Schools Alliance struggled financially because it failed to receive funding expected from the Walton and Gates foundations.⁵²

According to Media Transparency,⁵³ the top funders of think tanks that promote the free-market ideals of school choice are The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation (Bradley); the Sarah Scaife Foundation (Scaife); and the John M. Olin Foundation⁵⁴ (Olin). A 2007 study by Rabin and Chi of 15 prolific think tanks that have a free-market focus⁵⁵ found that more than half (59%) of the total amount granted to these

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school choice advocates from 1985-2005 came from Bradley, Scaife, and Olin.⁵⁶

Table 1 presents the funding activity of the three foundations that provided the most funding to prominent think tanks during 1985-2005, reported in three categories. The first, titled “Amount Granted Explicitly for Choice,” includes projects specifically labeled as related to school choice, such as Bradley’s donation to the Hudson Institute for \$34,000 to “support a study of school choice.”⁵⁷ The second, titled “Amount Granted with Discretion to Support Choice,” includes discretionary funds that went to organizations known to advocate school choice—described in the data, for example, as “no purpose given,” “project support,” “program support,” “operating support,” and so on. The third indicates the total amount Bradley, Scaife, and Olin contributed to choice advocacy think tanks overall. A similar table (Table 6) for 2005, the central concern of this brief, appears in a later discussion. This background data is, however, instructive.

Table 1: Top Three Funders and Amount Granted to 15 Free-Market Think Tanks from 1985-2005⁵⁸

Foundation	Amount Granted Explicitly for Choice	Amount Granted with Discretion to Support Choice	Total Amount Granted
<i>Bradley</i>	\$1,350,250 (3% of total granted)	\$22,336,960 (58% of total granted)	\$38,808,432
<i>Scaife</i>	\$0 (0% of total granted)	\$35,692,000 (93% of total granted)	\$38,252,000
<i>Olin</i>	\$85,000 (0.3% of total granted)	\$9,125,100 (37% of total granted)	\$24,507,335
Total	\$1,435,250 (1% of total granted)	\$67,154,060 (66% of total granted)	\$101,567,767

Source: Media Transparency

Significant financial support for school choice, although mainly for advocacy organizations other than think tanks, also comes from the DeVos family. Richard DeVos founded All Children Matter, an organization that funds political candidates who support school choice.⁵⁹ His son, Dick DeVos, created a foundation with his wife (the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation) that supports school vouchers.⁶⁰ According to PFAW, which opposes vouchers and is critical of the foundation, the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation has financially supported a national network of advocacy organizations.⁶¹

Table 2: Amount Granted to Free-Market Think Tanks in 2005

Think Tank	Amount Granted with Discretion to Support Choice	Total Amount Granted
<i>American Legislative Exchange Council</i>	\$5,000 (13% of total granted)	\$40,000
<i>Buckeye Institute</i>	\$115,000 (100% of total granted)	\$115,000
<i>Cato Institute</i>	\$710,750 (86% of total granted)	\$830,750
<i>Center for Education Reform</i>	\$1,233,914 (100% of total granted)	\$1,233,914
<i>Center of the American Experiment</i>	\$40,000 (80% of total granted)	\$50,000
<i>Heartland Institute</i>	\$138,500 (80% of total granted)	\$173,500
<i>Heritage Foundation</i>	\$3,812,000 (93% of total granted)	\$4,107,000
<i>Hoover Institution</i>	\$1,845,627 (85% of total granted)	\$2,170,015
<i>Hudson Institute</i>	\$175,000 (13% of total granted)	\$1,399,275
<i>Mackinac Center</i>	\$511,100 (67% of total granted)	\$761,100
<i>Manhattan Institute</i>	\$1,482,500 (75% of total granted)	\$1,974,967
<i>M&R Friedman</i>	\$208,000 (100% of total granted)	\$208,000
<i>Reason Foundation</i>	\$230,000 (99% of total granted)	\$232,500
<i>Thomas B. Fordham Institute</i>	\$30,000 (100% of total granted)	\$30,000
<i>Wisconsin Policy Research Institute</i>	\$460,000 (100% of total granted)	\$460,000
Total	\$10,997,391 (80% of total granted)	\$13,786,021

Source: Media Transparency

Free-Market Think Tanks and Their Funders. The think tank sector operates largely as a policy research industry separate and apart from academia. The first wave of think tank development (1900-1945) originated from the desire for organizations where researchers could work without what many see as the distraction of teaching, a routine part of a researcher's responsibilities in academic settings.⁶² These think tanks provided a stronger connection between university-trained experts and policy makers, as some academics began to leave universities to join policy-oriented think tanks.⁶³ More recently, think tanks have grown in number and influence. In fact, over the past several decades, the number of think tanks has more than quadrupled. Likewise, the news media have

increasingly used the works of think tanks in their news presentations. From 1995-2001, the number of times the news media cited think tanks almost doubled (from over 15,000 to approximately 26,000 citations).⁶⁴ Many of these think tanks, about two-thirds, are considered aligned with conservative ideology. The growth of conservative think tanks during this time period was fueled by the financial support of the Bradley, Smith Richardson, and Scaife foundations.⁶⁵ The 15 free-market think tanks listed above, in Table 2, all indicate a clear advocacy for school choice, based on their mission statements.⁶⁶ For example, the mission statement of the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation (M&R Friedman) states that the foundation focuses on "[p]romoting school choice to improve, through competition, the quality of K-12 education for all."⁶⁷ Table 2, above, indicates how much funding each of these think tanks received from the funders analyzed by Media Transparency in 2005. On average, 80% of the funding provided to them was discretionary, and therefore available for school choice activities.

School Choice Organizations/Practitioners and Their Funders. Table 3, following, provides a categorical chart of school choice funding for the 20 largest education donors in 2005. The first category, titled "Choice Advocacy Funding," includes funding for advocacy organizations and activities. The second, titled "School Choice Funding," includes grants made directly to choice practitioners (charter schools, for example). Because, as also noted above, successful choice implementation is a powerful argument in favor of more choice, an inclusive picture of advocacy funding must include both types of grants. The third category, "Overall K-12 Education Funding," indicates how much total funding each donor provided to education-related projects.

Again, data was retrieved from IRS 990-PF forms, which do not provide information about the foundations' political activities—unlike LM-2 reports which provided data for teachers' unions (discussed below). Since philanthropists' contributions to political candidates and organizations were not identified, the substantial figures below are almost surely an underestimate of their total funding to support school choice.

As the table illustrates, the Walton foundation ranks first among the top supporters of school choice in the United States, and the Gates foundation ranks second. Their combined support for advocacy activities and for practitioners accounts for over 80% of the total reported here. Among the top 20 foundations, Walton and Gates provide 84% of school choice grants and 94% of school choice advocacy grants. Unlike the foundations that fund think tanks, however, the Gates foundation and, to a lesser extent, the Walton foundation focus on grants to organizations that create and support diverse types of choice activities—that provide scholarships to families, for example, or that operate charter schools.⁶⁸

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Table 3: School Choice Funding in 2005⁶⁹ by the Top 20 Largest Education Donors⁷⁰

Foundation	Choice Advocacy Funding⁷¹	School Choice Funding	Overall K-12 Education Funding	Total Amount Funded
<i>Gates Foundation (Calendar Year [CY] 2005)</i>	\$1,537,850 (10% of top 20 total)	\$28,944,426 (31% of top 20 total)	\$241,531,703	\$1,355,371,860
<i>Walton Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$12,477,125 (84% of top 20 total)	\$49,348,250 (53% of top 20 total)	\$63,401,189	\$157,989,927
<i>Lilly Endowment (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$44,545,703	\$427,465,199
<i>Wallace Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$42,989,000	\$55,820,174
<i>Annenberg Foundation (7/1/04—6/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$38,927,911	\$251,663,628
<i>Broad Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$15,000	\$8,622,370	\$26,874,087	\$40,992,554
<i>Ford Foundation (10/1/04—9/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$19,029,670	\$511,847,276
<i>Oberkotter Foundation (12/1/04—11/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$17,565,120	\$24,689,137
<i>William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$23,000	\$14,565,333	\$320,091,473
<i>H. N. and Frances C. Berger Foundation (10/1/04—9/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$2,500	\$14,410,000	\$79,077,453
<i>Daniels Fund (CY 2005)</i>	\$825,000	\$1,682,253	\$13,340,088	\$35,982,658
<i>J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$2,040,000	\$12,361,312	\$23,820,448
<i>Starr Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$175,000	\$12,300,000	\$159,130,952
<i>Carnegie Corporation of New York (10/1/04—9/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$10,330,700	\$91,053,489

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Foundation	Choice Advocacy Funding	School Choice Funding	Overall K-12 Education Funding	Total Amount Funded
<i>Community Foundation Silicon Valley (7/1/04—6/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$1,110,000	\$10,212,862	\$54,402,324
<i>Ahmanson Foundation (11/1/04—10/31/05)</i>	\$0	\$895,000	\$9,716,550	\$41,218,405
<i>Freeman Foundation (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$0	\$8,886,759	\$42,067,148
<i>William Penn (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$49,500	\$8,877,037	\$64,641,331
<i>Brown Foundation (7/1/04—6/30/05)</i>	\$0	\$10,000	\$8,801,838	\$52,849,201
<i>New York Community Trust (CY 2005)</i>	\$0	\$206,500	\$8,765,935	\$142,064,232
Total	\$14,854,975	\$93,108,799	\$627,432,797	\$3,932,238,869

The Walton foundation is also a significant contributor to free-market think tanks⁷²; the Gates foundation is not. In 2005, the Gates foundation funded only one think tank advocating school choice, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Fordham). Only three other organizations shared in the \$1,537,850 that Gates provided for choice advocacy: (1) the New Schools Venture Fund (NSVF) (to help create the Education Sector think tank); (2) California Charter Schools Association (to support a campaign advocating the charter school movement); and (3) Charter School Leadership Council (for general operating support).

Walton and Gates also differ in the specific choice options they fund. Gates supports charters, but not vouchers. In 2002, 94% of Gates' school choice funding supported public choice (charter schools, for example). The remaining 6% was allocated to private schools, but as direct grants to schools rather than through voucher plans. Walton, on the other hand, funds charter schools and vouchers in relatively equal portions.⁷³

Other important supporters of school choice include the Broad Foundation, the Pisces Foundation, NSVF, and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). For the most part, these organizations tend to support charter school initiatives rather than advocacy organizations like think tanks.

Part of the Broad Foundation's mission is to improve urban public education through competition.⁷⁴ Accordingly, it concentrates its focus on nonprofit charter management organizations to increase the number of

charter schools.⁷⁵ The foundation's support for charter schools and pro-charter organizations follows from this mission, amounting to more than \$8 million in 2005.⁷⁶

In 2005, the Pisces Foundation (funded by Don and Doris Fisher) spent about \$6 million to support school choice. It focuses its funding on promoting high-quality charter schools.⁷⁷ Like the Broad Foundation, the Pisces Foundation funds schools run by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which is an organization that creates and supports a network of predominantly charter schools (55 out of the 57 existing KIPP schools are charter schools).⁷⁸ It also joins the Walton and Bradley foundations in supporting the Charter School Growth Fund, which awards grant and loan packages to charter operators.⁷⁹

NSVF funds entrepreneurial efforts (both for-profit and nonprofit) in education, such as charter school incubators or charter management organizations.^{80, 81} This fund has financially supported about 20 charter management organizations, including some that are also supported by the Broad Foundation.⁸² In 2005, it spent approximately \$10 million on these efforts.

Finally, the DOE is a large contributor to school choice efforts, with a focus on charter schools. Overall, it spent \$101,705,115 on school choice activities in 2005.⁸³ Most of this amount (\$76,411,071, or 75% of the total) was allocated toward charter school offices within state education departments. Another portion (\$12,275,291, or 12% of the total) was allocated to individual charter schools or districts with charter options. DOE provided a similar amount (\$13,018,753, or 13% of the total) to choice organizations, including the Brighter Choice Charter Schools, California Charter Schools Association, National Association of Charter School Authorizers, and Public Charter Schools Center for Student Support Services.

Strategies of School Choice Supporters

Philanthropists have employed many different strategies in their fight for school choice. As mentioned above, they heavily fund think tanks that can reach the media, policy makers, and the public.⁸⁴ Think tanks are able to navigate the political system—through increased political connections to powerful politicians and policy makers, large budgets, and high-powered leaders who are known experts in the field.⁸⁵ They generally know how to take full advantage of their publications with aggressive marketing and skillful publicity,⁸⁶ as well as timing calculated for dissemination into the policy process,⁸⁷ easily understandable information,⁸⁸ and strategic framing of their information to promote agendas.⁸⁹

Foundations supporting school choice also spend money on advertising (including television and newspaper advertisements as well as mailings), promotional book tours, and informational pamphlets for

politicians.⁹⁰ One example of clever marketing is illustrated by charter school supporters who took out a full page advertisement in *The New York Times* titled “Charter School Evaluation Reported by *The New York Times* Fails to Meet Professional Standards,” attacking a report by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) that found charter school students lagging behind students in regular public schools.⁹¹ Through this advertisement, these supporters were able to use the media to voice their criticisms of AFT’s research methods—even though, as others reported, the methods were the same as those commonly used by the advertisement’s sponsors.⁹²

In addition to such publicity, foundations also support activities like conferences and research on the effectiveness of choice programs, and they create organizations for such purposes as unifying charter schools, providing information to parents, encouraging parent networking and collaboration, and providing scholarships to private schools.⁹³

Possibilities are limited only by the imagination of funders and grantees. The Bradley foundation, for instance, has used some particularly aggressive strategies. It funded the Landmark Legal Foundation, a school choice advocacy group, to support Milwaukee’s passage of voucher legislation in 1991. Along with Olin, it also funded John Chubb and Terry Moe’s book, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, which has been highly influential in the choice debate.⁹⁴

Among the most important strategies are those designed to pressure policy makers into enacting and strengthening such school choice reforms as charter schools and publicly funded voucher programs.⁹⁵ Foundations hire lobbyists to promote their causes,⁹⁶ and similarly they fund lawyers to argue for school choice.⁹⁷ In addition, major philanthropists can fund political organizations with personal funds rather than through their organizations. For example, in 2004, John Walton, Bill Gates, and Don Fisher each contributed \$300,000 of their own money to support charter schools in Washington State’s referendum.⁹⁸

School Choice Opposition

Key Players

Unlike school choice advocates, opponents of choice do not enjoy substantive philanthropic support. While conservative foundations have been increasing their funding for free-market think tanks, there is no comparable success story for school choice opponents.⁹⁹ Liberal foundations, most likely to be choice opponents, are not as likely to use think tanks to further their agenda.¹⁰⁰ For instance, foundations like Ford with a generally progressive or liberal orientation have shied away from funding projects and think tanks they consider too political, in an attempt to remain neutral and unbiased.¹⁰¹ Conversely, free-market think tanks aggressively solicit donations from key philanthropists, who generally consider them a top funding priority.¹⁰² Nevertheless, like the school

choice advocates, there are a few key players opposing school choice who can and do exert their power in meaningful ways.

Teachers' Unions. Teachers' unions are arguably the most visible force opposing vouchers and charters. The local, state, and national teachers' unions can greatly influence political processes and decisions, as they have a strong, educated, and engaged membership and ample resources.¹⁰³ There are two main national unions: NEA and AFT. Teachers' unions have become very skeptical of the charter school movement, even though Al Shanker, the former AFT president, was one of those who initially popularized the concept. Support for charters may have waned in part because Shanker's vision of charter schools focused on teacher empowerment and innovation, which is no longer the current focus.¹⁰⁴

As is true of figures for choice advocates, the totals reported here are also surely underestimates. Notably missing here (like personal contributions above) are the contributions of state and local unions to actively oppose laws authorizing the establishment of more charter schools, lobby against choice in general, and oppose charter school expansion and vouchers.^{105, 106} Still, the larger picture presented here is informative.

Financial reports of the NEA reveal that it funds organizations opposing aspects of the choice movement, such as PFAW (described below) and Protect Our Public Schools.¹⁰⁷ Table 4, following, details funding activities relevant to choice for NEA and AFT in 2005. Based on information retrieved from IRS 990-PF forms and LM-2 reports, categories include political activities as well as grants, both to defeat choice reforms and to support public schools.

Political activities include the support of campaigns, ballot initiatives, policy development, advertising, voter registration, lobbying, political endorsements, and political strategy consulting (although the LM-2 reports did not provide detail on the political efforts listed). Sometimes—as in a contribution clearly designated to help defeat charter schools in Washington State¹⁰⁸—the specific use of a grant could be identified, but most listings could not be so well labeled.

Funding disclosure documents indicate that national teachers' unions have contributed relatively little toward advocating against choice or supporting public schools. However, it is not clear whether this is actually the case or if, perhaps, funding disclosures are inadequate. Anecdotally, it is known that teachers' unions have been very effective at funding and organizing to oppose statewide voucher initiatives.¹⁰⁹ This targeted funding has helped teachers' unions in their advocacy efforts against vouchers and, to a lesser extent, charter school expansion. Also, endorsements from teachers' unions are very important to many political candidates, especially for Democratic candidates for state legislatures in many, if not most, states.¹¹⁰

Table 4: Union Spending in 2005: Political Activities and Grants

	Political Activities Advocating Against Choice ¹¹¹	Political Activities Supporting Public Schools	Total Political Activities	Grants Advocating Against Choice	Grants Supporting Public Schools	Total Grants
NEA	\$500,000	\$600,000	\$24,985,250	\$45,000	\$2,145,302	\$65,489,536
AFT	\$155,000	\$0	\$15,776,764	\$550,000	\$516,089	\$1,728,813
Total	\$655,000	\$600,000	\$40,762,014	\$495,000	\$2,661,391	\$67,218,349

Anti-Choice Organizations. As mentioned above, NEA has supported PFAW, an organization that is opposed to school vouchers and fights against pro-voucher legislation and initiatives. It provides legal support to voucher opponents and educates the public about the problems with vouchers.¹¹²

NEA and AFT have also funded the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a think tank that “conducts original research on economic issues, makes policy recommendations based on its findings, and disseminates its work to the appropriate audiences.”¹¹³ EPI has reexamined existing research on charter schools that argue a charter school advantage in terms of achievement. For example, it was EPI personnel who reported that conservative criticism of an AFT report (cited above) was invalid because the research methods criticized were the same as those used by researchers in conservative organizations.¹¹⁴

Public School Supporters. Just as school choice funding can be disaggregated into advocacy and direct support for choice initiatives, school choice opposition can also be characterized in two ways: efforts to limit or end school choice policies and efforts to directly support public schools. Table 5, following, describes some of the prominent organizations supporting public schools.

Strategies of School Choice Opponents

Those opposed to school choice have strategies similar to those who advocate for school choice. They lobby against voucher legislation and sometimes against charter legislation, advocating more restrictive charter laws.¹¹⁵ At times, they work toward creating practical obstacles to specific choice efforts, using such strategies as: forcing compliance with municipal zoning laws (for example, by arguing that a designated location is inappropriate for a school); creating transportation obstacles (for example, by providing a meager transportation voucher instead of providing service); and, spreading rumors about charter schools (for example, by advertising via flyers that a charter school is floundering).¹¹⁶

Table 5: Public School Supporters

Organization	Description	Public School Funding in 2005¹¹⁷
<i>Boston Plan for Excellence</i>	Supports Boston’s public schools by testing new ideas that may accelerate education improvements and by encouraging the district to assess its policies and practices.	\$4,193,913 (7/1/04—6/30/05)
<i>Fund for Public Schools</i>	Works to improve New York City’s public schools through investments in school reform and greater involvement in the education of children.	\$8,225,879 (7/1/04—6/30/05)
<i>Learning First Alliance</i>	Strives to improve student learning in public schools based on quality research.	\$0 (7/1/04—6/30/05)
<i>NEA Foundation for the Improvement of Education</i>	Invests in public education to advance student achievement and prepare children for the changing world.	\$1,437,000 (9/1/04—8/31/05)
<i>New Visions for Public Schools</i>	Develops innovative programs that help public school students achieve their fullest potential.	\$18,716,946 (7/1/04—6/30/05)
<i>Parents for Public Schools</i>	Works to ensure that all public schools serve and attract all children.	\$0 (5/1/04—4/30/05)
Total		\$32,573,738

School choice opponents also support choice studies and lawsuits,¹¹⁸ as well as research. Research support has included the already cited and prominent AFT study, whose finding that charter school students are not achieving to the same degree as those in regular public school was later duplicated in government-funded studies¹¹⁹; and NEA and AFT support for EPI, which reviews school choice research.¹²⁰ This brief, too, was funded by NEA, in another of its grants for choice research studies.¹²¹

Philanthropy provided to those opposing school choice is not comparable to funding from school choice supporters. Furthermore, compared to the advocates of school choice, philanthropists and think tanks that oppose school choice are generally not as vocal. Dolny’s study of media citations of think tanks found that out of the ten institutions with the most media citations in 2000, EPI was the only one skeptical of school choice.¹²² The financial and political influence of those against school choice does not surface to the same degree or in the same ways.¹²³

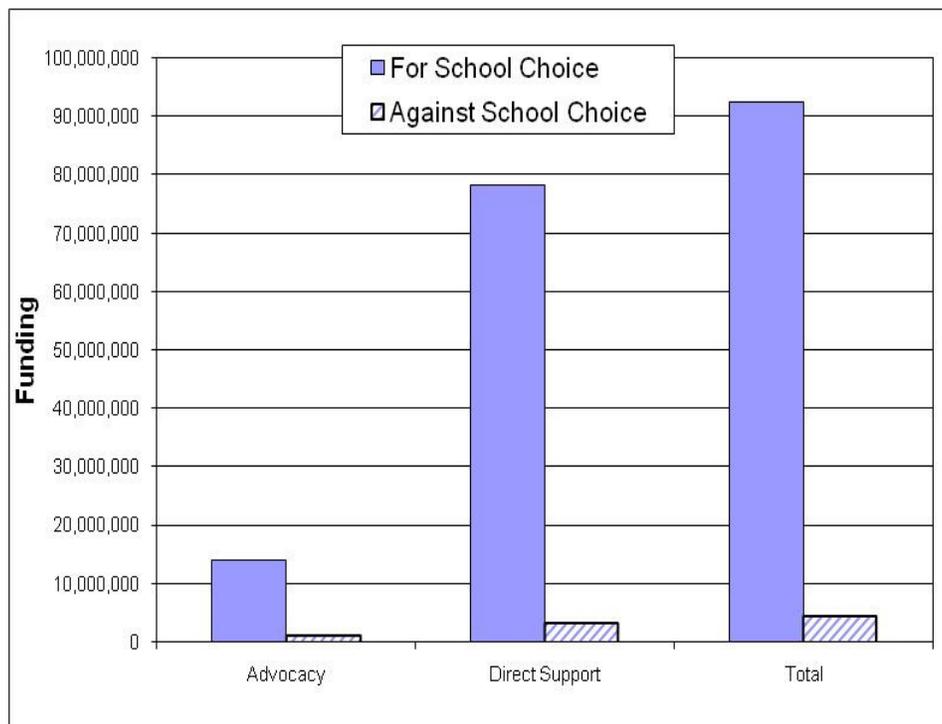
Comparisons

The most striking finding of this report is the tremendous imbalance between funding for choice advocacy and its opposition. School choice opponents are not funding to the same degree as advocates. Even

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when funding in support of political activities and of public schools is included, the total amount granted by the top two funders (NEA and AFT) to oppose school choice was \$3,261,391 in 2005. In stark contrast, the top two supportive funders (Walton and Gates) contributed \$78,292,676. Even when grants given directly to practitioners are excluded from this total, advocacy grants are still significantly higher than opposition grants: Walton and Gates' \$14,014,975 as compared to NEA and AFT's \$1,150,000 in 2005. Figure 1 illustrates these funding differences between top funders.

Figure 1: Comparison of 2005 Funding of School Choice Supporters and Opponents



Even this picture, however, does not capture the extent of the discrepancy, since it does not include DOE funding (\$101,705,115) supporting charters, nor Bradley, Scaife, and Olin's support (\$101,567,767) for think tank projects. Another \$3,565,000 is added to the total if discretionary choice grants provided to think tanks are included (see Table 6). Since these free-market think tanks do focus on promoting school choice causes, it can be speculated that some, if not most, of this discretionary funding has been used to support the school choice reform.

Given the discrepancy in funding, it is not surprising that conservative, free-market think tanks are generally larger, better funded, and more organized than their liberal counterparts.¹²⁴ Moreover, as illustrated in Table 2 and Table 6, conservative think tanks often have far more discretion in spending their grants, allowing them not only to

develop better infrastructure but also to engage in more diverse activities in support of their political goals.¹²⁵ For example, they frequently provide commentary on television, and the media often use their reports.¹²⁶

Table 6: Top Three Funders and Amount Granted to 15 Free-Market Think Tanks in 2005

Foundation	Amount Granted with Discretion to Support Choice	Total Amount Granted
<i>Bradley</i>	\$1,740,000 (68% of total granted)	\$2,540,275
<i>Scaife</i>	\$1,250,000 (100% of total granted)	\$1,250,000
<i>Olin</i>	\$575,000 (100% of total granted)	\$575,000
Total	\$3,565,000 (82% of total granted)	\$4,365,275

Source: Media Transparency

It is only fair to note that those advocating school choice arguably need more financial support because it is more difficult, and thus expensive, to promote change in an existing system than it is to defend the status quo: many people resist the unknown in any area. Therefore, it can be argued that school choice opponents can often foil choice advocacy plans with minimal effort and resources.¹²⁷ Whether that is true in a case of such dramatically unequal resources, however, remains to be seen.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Key findings of this study include the following:

- *A small group of philanthropists provides the majority of the funding in support of school choice.* From 1985-2005, three foundations provided more than half (59%) of all grants to think tanks supporting school choice. In 2005, only two of the top 20 funding foundations provided 84% of all grant monies.
- The teachers' unions (NEA and AFT) are the major contributors in opposition to school choice.
- The funding of school choice supporters is considerably higher than the funding of opponents.

Two key points important to the public are evident in these findings. The first is that the debate over school choice is being funded, and therefore dominated, by a very few key players. In terms of public debate, it means that information on the issue is largely coming from partisans rather than from objective analysts. As a result, some reports might well reflect the bias of funders and promoters. Unlike academic

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research, many reports released by think tanks and other advocacy organizations do not go through a peer review process in which unbiased and uninvolved scholars assess and verify the quality of the research methodology before a report is published.¹²⁸ Thus, not all information published on the issue is likely to be equally reliable.

Second, funding for each side is dramatically unequal, which opens the possibility that the issue will be decided by money rather than by other considerations, such as the role public schools may play in sustaining a democratic society. If school choice is implemented based solely on wealth, then it is likely to survive despite its effectiveness and long term impact.

In the interest of a well-informed and balanced public debate, it is therefore recommended that:

- Policy makers, media, and the public should become familiar with the relationships among donors, their ideological commitments, and advocacy activities. “Following the money” can be an important tool in sifting through and evaluating information.
- Researchers and policy analysts prioritize efforts to educate the general public about quality issues in research, including specifically: (1) sources of potential bias in the work, and (2) the value of peer review and the significance of its absence in some advocacy research.

Notes and References

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- ⁷⁰ As mentioned in the text, some of these foundations do not fund choice at all, as this list is the top 20 funders in K-12 overall.
- ⁷¹ Advocacy funding may be grossly exaggerated because of the lack of detail in the grant information, leading to the inclusion of: (1) funding activities of advocacy organizations (for example, think tanks) even though they may not have been concentrating on education/choice; and (2) funding of an organization that is advocacy-oriented (but also engage in other activities such as supporting charter schools).
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