

Greg Johnson: Give charter school a chance in Knoxville

By Greg Johnson

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National School Choice Week ends Saturday, and some Tennessee schoolchildren could very well find freedom from underperforming schools if proposals by Republican politicians and a reputable Knoxville nonprofit come to fruition.

Less than a week after a News Sentinel story highlighted the 70 percent increase since 2010-2011 in requests for school transfers in Knox County, Tennessee's senior U.S. senator, Lamar Alexander, introduced the "Scholarships for Kids Act," a bold proposal to provide \$2,100 in federal funding for 11 million low-income students to use at any K-12 school.

"This is a real answer to inequality in America: giving more children more opportunity to attend a better school," Alexander said. "Equal opportunity in America should mean that everyone has the same starting line. There would be no better way to help children move up from the back of the line than by allowing states to use federal dollars to create 11 million new opportunities to choose a better school."

With Alexander advocating choice in Washington, the state Legislature could enact a school voucher program this year. With the GOP supermajority favorably disposed to school choice, the only question seems to be the program's scope.

Gov. Bill Haslam, who backed a limited voucher program last year that would have let state dollars follow kids out of public schools performing in the bottom 5 percent, this week told a Nashville school choice rally, "We want to give the opportunity for more students to have more opportunity."

Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, at the same rally, said kids are "trapped" in bad schools. "The one thing that we're lacking is that school choice," Ramsey said. Ramsey reasonably supports a broader plan aimed at kids in schools in the bottom 10 percent.

Voucher critics cite a potential constitutional conflict in government money going to religious educational institutions. Others complain vouchers could drain funding from public schools.

In 2012, the state provided average funding of \$9,123 per student. School funding, generally, is based on how many kids show up, so if kids flee failing schools, dollars

dry up.

Low-income kids need help because private schools aren't cheap. Tuition at private Knox County schools ranges from \$8,544 for K-5 education at Christian Academy of Knoxville to more than \$11,000 at Catholic High School up to \$18,100 for secondary students at Webb School of Knoxville.

Knoxville kids could soon have another, cheaper choice. The Emerald Youth Foundation plans to apply to build Knox County's first public charter school. A long-serving urban ministry, Emerald Youth knows the needs of its neighborhood and its neighbors. A letter of intent is due Feb. 1, an application by April 1.

Nationally, charter schools, which can operate innovatively and quasi-independently, have grown from fewer than 2,000 serving 300,000 kids in 2000-2001 to 5,300 with 1.8 million students in 2010-2011. After turning down numerous charter applications, Knox County Schools, along with Washington and Nashville lawmakers, should give choice a chance.



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