

The case for public-school choice in the suburbs

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For two decades now, school-choice supporters have advanced two main arguments. First, it's unfair to trap poor kids in failing schools when better options are available. And second, giving these kids a choice will force the entire public-education system to improve.

Those assertions are still compelling, but they have their limitations. Namely: What about kids who aren't poor; attend schools that aren't failing; and live in school districts that, by some measures at least, aren't in dire need of improvement? I'm talking, of course, about our affluent, leafy suburbs. Do their residents deserve school choice too?

Set aside, for a moment, the fact that many suburban communities are [diversifying](#), with low-income and otherwise disadvantaged children moving into them in greater numbers than ever before. Forget, too, that even our best suburban districts are no great shakes when judged by [international comparison](#). Focus just on the most affluent, high-achieving, homogeneous communities you can picture: Say, Scarsdale (New York) or Bethesda (Maryland) or McLean (Virginia) or most of Marin County (California). Does school choice also have a place in these "[super zip codes](#)"?

This photo is currently unavailable

Many people believe it doesn't—witness recent debates about suburban charter schools in [New Jersey](#), [Tennessee](#), and the [Washington, D.C.-metro area](#). If people in those bedroom communities want choice, goes the argument, they can purchase it via the private-school market.

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Why shouldn't suburban residents enjoy options for public schooling?

[Photo by Hunter Desportes.](#)

Perhaps. But as Andy Rotherham [points out](#), forcing people to "go private" in order to get a customized education for their kids is not a great political strategy for building broad support for the public schools. When school levies come up for a vote, don't districts want as many taxpayers as possible to have a direct stake in the outcome?

And "customization" is the real issue. Even in upper-middle-class communities, not all parents want the same things for their kids. From my own personal experience (Fordham is working on collecting more rigorous, non-anecdotal data—stay tuned for that), affluent parents break down into at least three groups:

1. **[Tiger Moms \(and Dads\)](#)**, who want their kids pushed, pulled, and stretched in order to get into top colleges. They want gifted-and-talented programs in elementary school, lots of "honors" and Advanced Placement options in secondary school, and high-octane enrichment activities like orchestra, debate club, and chess teams. These folks have no patience for warm-and-fuzzy edu-babble; they want teachers who themselves attended elite schools and can help their charges attain the pinnacle of academic achievement.
2. **[Koala Dads \(and Moms\)](#)**, who want school to be a joyful experience for their kids, big and little. They want lots of time for creativity, personal expression, social-emotional development, and relationship-building. Models like Montessori and Waldorf are catnip to these folks; they want teachers who can role-model a kind, soulful, tolerant, mindful way of living in the world—a sort of wisdom that goes beyond mere knowledge. They, too, aspire for their children to attend great colleges—but probably the liberal artsy/crunchy types.
3. **[The Cosmopolitans](#)**, who want their children prepared to compete in a multicultural, multilingual world. They want a language immersion program for their tots (ideally Mandarin, though they'll settle for Spanish); International Baccalaureate (IB) starting in middle school at the latest; and at least one, if not several, overseas experiences in high school. They want multicultural, multilingual teachers—and aspire for their children to either run, or save, the world. (Yes, these are close relatives of the Tiger Moms—*Madres Tigres* you could call them.)

Now imagine you're the superintendent of schools in an affluent community that contains members of all three groups. How are you going to satisfy their differing demands? Elementary school is particularly challenging; does everyone do "Mandarin immersion"? Doubtful. Does everyone do a Waldorf-style "don't read till your adult teeth come in" program? Double-doubtful. Instead, you provide a standard-issue curriculum, perhaps with a gifted-and-talented option, and maybe Mandarin and Spanish electives at select campuses. The Tiger Parents are relatively satisfied; the Cosmopolitans and Koala Dads, less so.

The challenges continue in middle school and high school, though the smorgasbord nature of the latter makes customization a little more feasible. The Tiger Parents get honors and AP tracks for their kids (plus orchestra, etc.); the Cosmopolitans get bona fide foreign-language programs and maybe IB; the Koala Dads get...well, some sympathetic hippy art teachers, perhaps.

Is this the best we can do? Maybe taxpayers footing the bill, many of them without school-age kids of their own, don't much care if the district fails to satisfy the whims of every parent; what good is a warm-and-fuzzy Waldorf kid to the economy, anyway? What the public wants is likely more practical: Young people who will go on to make a good living, be good citizens, and not be a permanent drain on the public fisc. If parents want more than that for their kids, they can pay for it themselves! Public education is a public good, not just a private good. If parents want a niche education, they can spend their own damn money.

Understood and in its way understandable. There *are* limits on what the public should be asked to support financially; schools that don't help students reach basic proficiency in math and reading, in particular, don't deserve public subsidies.

But in the leafy suburbs, where children come to Kindergarten with all manner of advantages, schools could teach yoga all day and their students would still probably ace the state tests. There's more margin for error there—and arguably more room for innovation and experimentation. The stakes just aren't as high as they are in the urban core, where education is a matter of life or death.

Perhaps the best case for customization and choice in the 'burbs is that it will result in better schools—those that are more vibrant and effective because they are allowed to be true communities with clear values, places that don't have to be all things to all people. If one-size-fits-all doesn't work in the city, why does it work in the suburbs?



How can one school satisfy Koala Dads, Tiger Moms, and the Cosmopolitans?

[Photo by edwin.11.](#)