

2nd Opinion: Prestonwood school head counters Johnson

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Editor's note: This article has been updated to include a response from Charles Foster Johnson.

Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, has a lifelong legacy of devotion to Christian-based initiatives, of which I am sincerely grateful. My rebuttal to his "Texas Baptist Voices" column, ["Public education as a truly conservative Texas value,"](#) does not question his personal and passionate opinions on anti-school-choice options. However, his crusade against school-choice options include claims that are false, historically and theologically shallow, and intellectually dishonest.



Larry Taylor Johnson's conviction is that the use of taxpayer funds for faith-based schools violate the constitutional mandate of the separation of church and state. Johnson graduated from Mississippi College, a private Baptist college. Students at Mississippi College have been receiving taxpayer funding grants, or "vouchers," for a very long time (i.e., Federal Pell Grant). These same taxpayer-funded grants, or "vouchers," are used by Texas faith-based universities. Thus, the "separation of church and state" argument falls flat, unless those making these claims want to apply the same standard at the university level.

Johnson claims school-choice options harm public schools. This does not

align with his personal choice to attend a private-Baptist college that has received millions of dollars in “vouchers” over the years. Principally speaking, this is the very same criticism Johnson is now levying on K-12 faith-based schools. Does he really believe the thousands of graduates from faith-based universities who have qualified for needs-based government “vouchers” have had the net result of damaging the common good of all of society? Johnson’s personal legacy of being a positive contributor to society since graduating from a private-Christian college disproves his current claim today. And the research supports my claim.

A landmark research project, The Cardus Education Survey, studied students six to 21 years after they graduated high school (ages 24-39). This study found Christian school graduates were more generous with their money, time, service to their community and to global humanitarian needs. This project, and other research, demonstrates that private faith-based schools have a significant impact on society and the common good.

I agree with Johnson’s claim that the state has an obligation to all children and not to just a few affluent students. However, his charge that school-choice options are for the affluent is preposterous. There are plenty of fact-based examples in which the poor have substantially improved thanks to school-choice, such as The ABCs Of School Choice-2017 edition. This research analyzes America’s 61 school-choice programs passed into law in 30 states and the District of Columbia. Examine the school-choice models in Georgia, Florida and other states where different options are benefiting the poor. Read through the study by the Brookings Institution and Harvard Kennedy School on school choice that found minority students who received a school voucher to attend private elementary schools in 1997 were, as of 2013, [10 percent more likely to enroll in college](#) and 35 percent more likely than their counterparts in public school to receive a college degree.

One of the most powerful correlations for upward mobility for people in

poverty is whether a person graduates from college. Those with college degrees earn, on average, \$4.4 million over the course of their lives compared to the \$1.2 million earned by individuals who graduate from high school but don't earn university degrees, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). If private K-12 schools place more minorities and high poverty students in college, it clearly has a positive impact on society and the common good.

Lastly, Johnson claims community schools obey Matthew 19:13-15, in which Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Certainly, Johnson knows that this spin, or distortion, of Scripture plays on the heartstrings of public school unions and associations. The bottom line is we have an educational crisis in our country. We need public, private, faith-based, home-school and online education options to all succeed. Any assistance to accomplish this goal would elevate all children, especially children and parents who currently cannot afford to choose their education. The faith-based community, including my brother in Christ Johnson, should be first in line to rally for the hearts and minds of these children.

Larry Taylor is the head of school at Prestonwood Christian Academy in Plano.

Charles Foster Johnson replies:

I appreciate Larry Taylor's counterpoint to my *Baptist Standard* piece on school-choice vouchers. We obviously have different views on the diversion of public money to private schools, but several clarifications are in order:



Charles Foster Johnson • Mr. Taylor equates federal Pell Grants to religious colleges with state-funded vouchers to religious private schools. Such equation does not exist.

Federal law recognizes that college education is voluntary, while K-12 education is compulsory and mandatory. In short, participation in a religious college is a voluntary assembly protected under constitutional law, while elementary, middle school and secondary education is mandated under the law, and thereby protected from the government establishment of religion that vouchers entail.

Colleges and universities enroll adults legally capable of making decisions regarding voluntary religious participation, while K-12 serves children.

- I stand by my assertion the voucher will not begin to cover the cost of a private education that even approximates the quality of the education that poor child receives in the traditional public school. Quality private education costs far more than what the voucher covers.

Furthermore, there is no transportation allotment attached to the voucher. One surely notices that private schools are not located in poor neighborhoods. How would the poor child get to school?

- The poorest children among us attend public schools. They are the places these children are taught, fed, affirmed and loved. Sixty-two percent of the 5.4 million schoolchildren in Texas are on free and reduced lunch and

breakfast in our public schools. Private schools do not exist to care for poor children in this way, nor do they intend to accept the influx of poor children into their schools through vouchers. That is the very reason private schools are private in the first place.

It is as morally wrong for the State of Texas to divert already stretched public dollars for underwriting the religious mission of private church and parochial schools as it is for the state to require intrusive accountability measures for the private schools that receive that public money. Let private schools remain private, public schools remain public.

- As we often state, the chief objection we have to vouchers is the inherent religious liberty violations of them. The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the State of Texas, Article 1, Sections 6 and 7 states this: “No man shall be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry against his consent. No money shall be appropriated, or drawn from the Treasury for the benefit of any sect, or religious society, theological or religious seminary; nor shall property belonging to the State be appropriated for any such purposes.”

Clearly, using tax dollars for religious private schools violates this principle.

- Do Texas Christians really want their tax money to fund Muslim private schools? We have 11 madrassas in the state of Texas. Do Texas Baptists really want their tax money to fund Roman Catholic schools that teach the infallibility of the pope? Do Texas Catholics really want their tax money funding Baptist schools that teach children the priesthood of all believers?

“School choice” vouchers constitute bad policy that does not square with the conservative convictions most Texans hold. They must be defeated, once again, in the 2017 legislative session.

Charles Foster Johnson is pastor of Bread Fellowship in Fort Worth and

executive director of Pastors for Texas Children.