

Voices: School vouchers or religious freedom?

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“School choice” is a hot potato.

When several Texas superintendents make \$400,000 to \$500,000 a year, questions skyrocket.

When your child is bullied, “school choice” sounds right.

When your daughter is forced to undress with a boy to stay in sports or parents must fight against luridly graphic X-rated sex books—describing the very act, many kinds of which are abhorrent especially to Christians, in shocking detail—then, “school choice” sounds like a necessity.

I recently read a high school graduate sued her school because she could not read or write.

Good parents do not want their children bullied, sexed or failing the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic.

Yet “school choice” is a cover for “school vouchers,” where parents can opt in through a variety of ways to receive taxpayer funding for private schools or homeschooling, with the religious part hidden.

With all that, we have a religio-political hot potato not easy to dress and serve.

Hiding religious aims

I have been a champion of religious freedom for 30 years. I documented in

When Texas Prison Scams Religion how the far-right has abused religious freedom. When the state prison “buys faith from prisoners with favor,” that diminishes the authenticity of the very faith favored.

“School choice” vouchers are pushed almost totally by Christian legislators and politicians. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has supported Baptist dominance in our Texas prisons and has been ramrodding school vouchers.

Baptists like myself revere the heritage of Roger Williams, who founded the first Baptist church in America, and his fight for true religious freedom. Compare Williams to John Calvin, who ruled Geneva, Switzerland with an iron Christian fist. Many of us see Patrick and others edging more toward Calvin than not.

I am guessing there are not many—if any—Muslim or Buddhist or communist private schools where any of the “school choice” parents are wanting to send their children. Marinate on that. Then you will see through Patrick’s gloss he has used in the prison system to horridly devastating effect.

Texas has great private schools. Most are Protestant or Catholic. What politicians like Patrick are doing knowingly, in fact, is forwarding “Christian school vouchers,” though this agenda often is hidden and never, ever written out like that.

Flip this over. Do you as a Christian want your tax money spent on a Muslim or Buddhist or communist private school?

If passed, the plan is for tax dollars to fund Christian private schools. If there was a chance a lot of funding would go to a communist “school choice” school, well, Christian legislators cannot have that.

Valuing religious freedom

If we value religious freedom—unlike “buying faith with favor” as I documented in Texas prisons—then we believe the authenticity of one’s faith is best forwarded when the state has no stake in favoring or in persecuting any faith.

No citizen should feel like they are any less a citizen for any faith they choose, or if they choose no faith at all. That’s the crux. Therein, when a person feels truly free to believe or not to believe, that is where the authenticity of faith best grows.

Do you support the freedom to be authentic?

When you see “school choice,” know that is a surreptitious cover-up for “Christian school vouchers.” I, myself, do not like my faith exploited in such a cover-up.

There is little left to the hot potato of “school choice” when boiled down to its essence, skinned of political allegiances and the knots of differences removed.

Therefore, the choice is between “Christian school vouchers” or honestly valuing religious freedom within the authenticity of faith.

Michael Maness retired after 20 years as a Texas prison chaplain and is the author of many articles and books, including How We Saved Texas Prison Chaplains 2011 and When Texas Prison Scams Religion, the latter of which documents one of the greatest government religious entanglements in Texas history. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.