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# THE THREE LANGUAGES OF SCHOOL CHOICE

How to Have Better Conversations about Education Freedom

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### **Executive Summary: What is Happening to the School Choice Movement?**

Generating and resolving in-group tension is nothing new to the school choice movement. Choice's earliest legislative victories would not have happened without the willingness of community leaders to reach across the aisle. The philosophical or political frameworks that led people to support school choice solutions were less important than pursuing the policy itself. As the late Wisconsin representative Annette "Polly" Williams said, "If you're drowning and a hand is extended to you, you don't ask if the hand is attached to a Democrat or Republican" (Carl 2011).

That trait is being tested even as school choice sees an unprecedented level of success in the United States. 2021 saw more school choice legislation enacted than any previous year. Eighteen states enacted seven new programs and expanded 21 others, leading some in the school choice movement to call 2021 the "year of educational choice." (Bedrick and Tarnowski 2021). 2023 didn't just see even more school choice legislation enacted—new programs were reaching more students than ever before. Before the 2023 legislative session, just two universal or near-universal private school choice programs existed (in West Virginia and Arizona). As of August 2023, that total jumped to nine (Iowa, Utah, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Ohio; Lovell 2023). One could be forgiven for assuming that, in the wake of a wave of legislative victories, the school choice coalition itself would be more unified than ever. Yet, between social media, the direction of school choice op-eds, and private conversations between coalition members, in-group tension threatens future success.

The school choice movement is hardly unique in this regard. Political polarization has intensified in recent years (Levin, Milner, and Perrings 2021). Polarization has affected how

Americans speak to each other (Jiang et al. 2020), how we learn about what is happening in the world (Garimella et al. 2021), whom we cooperate with (Dimant 2023), how we solve societal issues (Dolman et al. 2021), and where we live (McCartney, Orellana, and Zhang 2021).

Considering that maintaining an alliance among people of differing political dispositions requires a shared understanding of facts, trust, and cooperation, it is no surprise that the school choice coalition may be feeling these tensions.

People often view each other more skeptically in a polarized culture, but that does not mean the core arguments for school choice have changed. When reading progressive school choice advocates today, the moral and philosophical ideas underpinning their arguments closely parallel those made by progressive school choice advocates 30 years ago. Likewise, conservative and libertarian advocates today are not relying on new or revolutionary ideas that their 1990s counterparts lacked. While different generations may have different cultural issues requiring different responses, the mental frameworks that shape those responses has remained fairly consistent. As societies become more politically polarized, it is our *perception* of other groups' ideas that changes (Dimant 2023). In the abstract, cooperation will still sound nice, but people are likelier to doubt other groups' willingness to cooperate. In classic prisoner's dilemma fashion, then, fewer people are willing to initiate cooperation for fear of being taken advantage of.

When trust fades, cooperation ceases. And if the various groups within the school choice movement cease to cooperate, school choice will have a hard ceiling, and transforming the American K-12 education system will be more difficult. Surely, no one in the school choice

coalition wants 2023 to prove to be the peak of the movement. To build on this year's successes, groups within the school choice movement must learn to trust each other again.

With *The Three Languages of School Choice*, I offer a first step in strengthening the school choice coalition. Progress here requires cutting through the polarized fog that obscures our perspective of our longtime allies. To that end, the remainder of this essay is divided into four parts. First, I review some history of the school choice movement and demonstrate that the policy is traditionally nonpartisan. Second, I present the narrative policy framework (NPF) approach to policy studies. This concept offers a compelling, non-reductionist explanation for why groups gravitate to the policy issues they do. Third, I pair NPF with the three-axes model of political communication, developed by economist Arnold Kling. This model helps explain why groups sharing a policy position can still politically differ. Fourth, I use the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race as a case study to illustrate how the Three Languages can explain why various people within the school choice movement react to the same K-12 education event in different ways. Fifth and finally, I offer some takeaways readers from the school choice coalition can use to work with each other more effectively.

### **On the Shoulders of Politically Diverse Giants**

School choice as a contemporary political issue grew from widespread discontent with the public K-12 school system in the late twentieth century. The Elementary & Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided significant incentives for states to develop rigorous standardized testing. Just a few years later in 1970, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began providing an unprecedented level of data about students' academic

progress. More concern was given to how the United States ranked internationally. As results poured in over the years, it became clear that academic performance was stagnating even as inflation-adjusted spending was growing (Peterson 2003, Hanushek and Rivkin 1996). Public pressure mounted for the American education system to produce results, perhaps epitomized in the damning 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Decentralizing the delivery of education was increasingly seen as an effective way to accomplish that goal (Chubb and Moe 1990). In addition to these academic concerns, social critiques of the K-12 system became more common. Disadvantaged populations complained the public schools were not meeting the needs of their communities, becoming more of a bureaucracy than a social service provider (Viteritti 1999). While no stranger to the argument that families should have access to religious schools, religious groups influenced this debate during this period as well (Forman 2007). Decentralizing public education provision was thought to be a way to align incentives more efficiently.

School choice solutions took on a few forms. First, in the 1970s, a number of school districts across the country began creating magnet schools, which sought to create integrated public schools by creating schools in disadvantaged areas with unique curricula that would attract white students. Most major American cities had some form of magnet school by 1980, and the 1985 Magnet Schools Assistance Program further accelerated their growth. While magnet schools were a significant step in creating educational choice, the school choice coalition of today places little to no emphasis on them. As such, I will focus more on other forms of school choice receiving the movement's focus.

Second, charter schools arose in the 1990s, thanks to Minnesota passing the first charter school law in 1991. Minnesota's law was a distinctly bipartisan effort, with the legislation text sketched out by a Citizens League task force, championed by American Federation of Teachers president Al Shanker, and supported by both moderate Democrats and Republicans (Junge 2012). California followed the year after, as a Republican governor signed a Democrat-sponsored charter bill into law. By 1994, nine more states had passed charter school laws. Democrats led the charge in Colorado, Massachusetts, Georgia, Hawaii, and New Mexico. Republicans drove the efforts to success in Arizona and Wisconsin. The charter legislation in Michigan and Kansas had such widespread support that it is difficult to attribute leadership to one party or another. Of the 39 states that passed charter school legislation before the turn of the century, only three states could be said to have failed to drum up bipartisan support (Langhorne 2019).

The third form, and generally the focus of this essay, was private school choice. Milwaukee launched the nation's first full school voucher program in 1990, which allowed students under a certain income limit to take public per-pupil dollars dedicated to their education and attend a private school of their choice (religious schools were included in these options beginning in 1995). Arguably the most famous leader of the Milwaukee voucher movement was Howard Fuller, who helped establish and lead Malcolm X's Liberation University in North Carolina. The chief sponsor of the bill was the aforementioned Democrat, Representative Polly Williams, who worked with both Republicans and Democrats to support the bill. Republican governor Tommy Thompson, who himself proposed a school voucher program in 1987, signed Rep. Williams' bill into law (Witte and Wolf 2017). Cleveland followed

suit in 1996. Republican representative Michael A. Fox had pursued some sort of private school choice legislation in Ohio for nearly two decades before finding some bipartisan support for a statewide proposal in 1992. Because this proposal included religious private schools among those eligible to receive voucher students from the beginning, this proposal received relatively more support from religious groups. Though this effort failed, it generated momentum that led Democratic Cleveland city councilwoman Fannie Lewis to actively support school vouchers in 1994. The same year, Democratic mayor of Cleveland Michael R. White endorsed vouchers in his recommendations for supporting the city's public educational system. After the next statewide elections, Republicans had a strong hold of the legislature and gave Rep. Fox the House Education Committee chair. In 1995, Republican governor George Voinovich became a more active proponent of vouchers, ensuring the nation's second private school choice program would be in the state budget the following year (Bodwell 2006). After *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) confirmed that this private school choice program abided by the United States Constitution, more legislators across the country had the confidence to support a cascade of school choice legislation over the following years. By 2010, 26 private school choice programs operated in the United States. By August 2023, 78 programs existed (EdChoice 2023).

Just as political actors from both parties have been crucial to school choice victories, both parties have formed formidable opposition in various contexts. Recent Democrat support for some school choice efforts have been entirely absent (Greene 2021). Republican support also is not guaranteed, however, as there remain some Republican bastions, such as the state legislature of Texas, that remain opposed to school choice due to a perceived threat to small communities (Lopez 2022).



Historically speaking, school choice support cannot be adequately predicted by party politics, considering inconsistent support and opposition by both the Democratic and Republican parties. Any attempt to strengthen the school choice coalition of today would do well to understand why these local coalitions were able to form in the past. In general, classical, rationalist understandings of the policy process are inadequate here because they assume one side of a policy issue has a unified message behind its support. Rationalist approaches also assume the pull of self-interest is so strong that politicians will only endorse legislation that materially benefit the exact constituents they need to win elections. In my estimation, this assertion struggles to explain why the earliest school voucher programs were able to generate support from Republicans, considering the beneficiaries of those programs were overwhelmingly not Republican voters.

Instead, we need a more nuanced approach to policies studies that recognizes the humanity behind people's policy preferences. And few things are more human than our attachment to telling stories.

### **Theory: What Makes a School Choice Narrative**

#### ***Narrative Policy Framework***

Narratives are one of, if not the, most important ways people process and convey information. Neuroscientists have found the ability to understand stories is more essential to human function than even the ability to speak or move. In fact, it is more fundamental to self-identity than other cognitive functions like kinesthetic, linguistic, and mathematical processing (see Drummond et al 2015; Ash, Moore, Vesely, and Grossman 2007; Young and Saver 2001).

The human brain tends to use narratives to ground itself in reality, recall and understand the past, and imagine possible futures. Because public policy generally intends to provide evidence-based approaches to improve upon past governance, thinking about policy debates through a narrative lens is only natural.

This is where the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) comes in. NPF offered the political science community a marriage between narrative approaches—sometimes criticized by social scientists for being too nebulous to make meaningful discoveries—with scientific thinking (Jones and McBeth 2010). In other words, NPF had such a clear vision of how humans use stories to pursue their preferred public policies that ideas built on it could be falsifiable (or, famously, “clear enough to be wrong”). By providing structure to the study of narratives in policy contexts, social scientists can agree more easily about whether and which stories are being used.

What, then, makes a policy narrative? First, much like any other story, complete policy narratives have four distinct traits: settings, characters, plots, and morals. *Settings* are more than just the geographic location of a policy debate. History, cultural norms, institutions, and legal limitations all shape how people respond to a public problem. Different communities will have different relationships with their government and the governing process. *Characters* generally are comprised of villains, victims, and heroes (Stone 2002). Heroes are not simply people who agree with me, and villains are not simply those who oppose me. Instead, one prefers policies that support or empower one’s heroes— especially to lift one’s victims out of distress— and put one’s villains in their rightful place. Examples of heroes, villains, and victims will be explored further in the next section. *Plots* link these characters to their settings and

provide a logic explaining how these characters—with whatever natures, interests, and agency they have—operate in their political circumstances. These features culminate in *morals*, which in a policy context, will communicate specific calls to action or policy solutions in response to a public problem.

One key feature of NPF's understanding of policy narratives is *bounded relativity*, which identifies a tension among political actors. On the one hand, people want to win. In policy conflicts, winning requires making your position attractive enough to win the support needed to see your policy enacted. In a vacuum, we would expect those communicating policy narratives to shape and conform their stories in ways that are increasingly attractive to the kind of groups whose support is most important to achieving legislative victory (McBeth et al. 2007). For instance, if the benefits of the status quo are concentrated on a few actors who can be categorized as villains, a policy storyteller might focus more on vilifying language that makes any sort of change more clearly a societal good.<sup>1</sup> In short, people will use stories that help them get the policies they want. This is not a revolutionary idea; rationalist approaches to the policy process have emphasized it for years.

But on the other hand, people's desire to win is *bound* by overarching ideas that motivate their involvement. After all, if the only thing activists cared about was being on the winning side, they would simply swap allegiances, and there would be no opposition or

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<sup>1</sup> The storyteller might accomplish this through "policy symbols," which analogizes some aspect of a policy issue to some other, emotionally charged story (e.g., calling a political opponent "anti-democratic" tends to characterize them as juxtaposed to the liberal political order that the storyteller's audience might value; see (Stone 2002, Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Cobb and Elder 1972). Or the storyteller might use "policy surrogates," which seek to make a policy conflict a surrogate for a greater political battle that the audience might see (arguably one recent example of a policy surrogate is masking during the COVID-19 pandemic, which often became tools of social proof for Democrat or Republican ideals; see Birkland et al. 2021).

minority opinions. Policy narratives will fit the parameters of the group's or storyteller's beliefs, cultural norms, institutions, and other contexts. In fact, NPF literature finds two-way storytelling streets between individuals, the groups they belong to, and broader society. Each level participates in the narrative-making process in different ways, shaping and being shaped by the other levels.

Because policy narratives are shaped in part by beliefs and ideas, any attempt to use NPF benefits by understanding the beliefs and ideas at play in a policy conflict. Jones and McBeth's seminal argument for NPF (2010) suggested using Lakoff's Family-as-Nation metaphors (2002) to anchor the ideas underneath policy narratives, but many NPF papers either simply attribute to partisanship without deep investigation or do not discuss ideas at all. In all these cases, group beliefs are seen as monolithic with group policy preferences, which would suggest that ideologies are homogenous within a coalition. In other words, without a solid theory behind the ideas motivating policy preferences, NPF research essentially assumes that all who advocate for a certain policy see the same heroes, villains, and victims. But the very existence of political coalitions—such as the school choice movement—demonstrates that advocates are not always homogenous. When a coalition forms, each sub-group within that coalition brings with them their cultures, institutions, beliefs, and ideas, which make them distinct from each other. Though they have the same policy desire, these sub-groups do not necessarily have the same political perspective. Because these political perspectives bind the narratives these sub-groups are willing to communicate, in-group conflict is always a possible threat.

***The Three-Axes Model of Political Communication***

School choice support is not monolithic, so for a study of policy narratives within the coalition, it is useful to have a model of political ideology that allows for distinct differences that are not mutually exclusive. For an understanding of how these overarching political philosophies guide narrative formation about policy, I use a model of political communication offered by Kling (2013). Rather than singular left-right or pro-anti dichotomies as frequently depicted in policy studies, Kling presents three narratives presented by three major political ideologies in the United States: progressivism, conservatism, and libertarianism. According to Kling, progressives believe:

*My heroes are people who have stood up for the underprivileged. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the oppression of women, minorities, and the poor.*

Conservatives believe:

*My heroes are people who have stood up for Western values. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to the assault on the moral virtues and traditions that are the foundation for our civilization.*

Finally, libertarians believe:

*My heroes are people who have stood up for individual rights. The people I cannot stand are the people who are indifferent to government taking away people's ability to make their own choices.*

These assertions are summarized in Table 1. Kling contends that people who consistently vilify social oppressors and lionize friends of the underprivileged usually will

identify as progressives; people who consistently villainize immoral or anti-Western people and heroize those with good principles usually will identify as conservatives; and people who consistently villainize coercive people and heroize self-governed people usually will identify as libertarians. The three axes of Kling’s model of political communication, then, are not simply progressivism, conservatism, and libertarianism, but rather the oppressor-oppressed, civilized-barbarian, and liberalized-tyrant dichotomies.<sup>2</sup> Each of these ideologies has distinct heroes and villains, which Kling groups and references as “axes,” which makes this approach to competing political ideologies an ideal baseline for an NPF study.

*Table 1: Kling’s three-axes model*

<b>Ideology</b>	<b>Axes</b>	<b>Heroes are those who...</b>	<b>Villains are those who...</b>
Progressivism	Oppressor-Oppressed	Defend the systematically marginalized and underprivileged	Systematically oppress the marginalized and underprivileged
Conservatism	Civilized-Barbarian	Those who hold themselves to moral, Western principles	Those who do not practice the moral Western principles or reject them outright
Libertarianism	Liberalized-Tyrant	Live freely and work toward others doing the same	Use coercion to get their way

*Adapted from Kling (2013)*

Crucially, people within a particular ideology also need not agree with each other in a given sociopolitical circumstance. Kling uses American responses to the Fidel Castro regime as

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<sup>2</sup> In an updated edition to *The Three Languages of Politics* (2017), Kling notes that the rise of Donald Trump in the United States may demand a fourth axis for his model to encompass the populist ideology. Kling suggests this axis heroizes “real Americans,” who tend to be working class people in rural areas and small towns. This axis villainizes the “elites,” who are detached from reality and needlessly make life harder through their hifalutin ideas. Kling acknowledges that the reality of this axis complicates his model because his initial three axes all fall under the “elite” camp villainized by the populists.

an example. Different progressives have supported and opposed Castro depending on whether they see him as an oppressor or a member of the oppressed fighting Cuba's true oppressors. Similarly, the three-axes model does not assume that any of the three ideologies disagree with each other on a particular policy issue. A progressive, conservative, and libertarian may all villainize Castro—the progressive because he is oppressing people who cannot defend themselves, conservatives because Castro has selfish and immoral values, and libertarians because he is an authoritarian.

This latter phenomenon also explains why seemingly natural ideological coalitions do not always form. Under a narrative policy framework, one group can agree with another about a policy solution for the “wrong reasons.” In fact, that group can agree on a policy solution while remaining a villain according to the other group's perspective. Two groups are unlikely to work together toward a policy solution when one views the other as a villain. For instance, although progressives and libertarians both emphasize freedom and liberation in at least some sense, the two groups were not aligned during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. While the movement now is frequently heralded as commendable by political actors self-identifying as progressive, conservative, and libertarian alike, its propensity to use a progressive communication—employing “oppressor” characterizations of villains and “oppressed” characterizations of heroes—dissuaded other political agents who might have looked, on paper, to be natural allies. Kling, a self-identified libertarian, notes that libertarians during the civil rights era were not inclined to join the progressives because of the villain they had developed. For example, although Barry Goldwater openly supported racial equality, he opposed the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 because he felt it granted too much power to the federal government—long a key villain of American libertarians (Menand 2001).

### **Analysis of the School Choice Movement**

The progressive, conservative, and libertarian axes all exist within the school choice coalition. The remainder of this essay will use the theory offered by NPF and Kling's three axes to understand the groups within the school choice advocacy coalition, potential resonances and dissonances between those groups, and potential paths forward for these groups and the study of them.

#### ***The Three Languages of School Choice Support***

##### *Progressivism and school choice: Children's liberation*

Recalling the historical discussion above, arguably the two most important figures in the United States' first school voucher program were progressives. Civil rights activist Howard Fuller fought for equitable education of African American children as far back as the 1960s, even helping lead Malcolm X's Liberation University in Raleigh, North Carolina. His work turned to his hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1978. In 1989, Rep. Polly Williams proposed a voucher program confined to the Milwaukee metropolitan school district, Fuller threw his support behind it, despite the skepticism of some progressive allies. For Fuller, vouchers were a practical method to empower Black children who had been failed chronically by their districted schools (Fuller 2015).



The progressive's case for school choice begins with the villain—a public school system that has consistently failed poor and minority children. The plot involves the villain creating and bolstering an education system doomed to inequality—school assignment based on residence has concentrated quality public schools in wealthy areas, meaning both quality public and private schools are restricted to rich families. Villainous agents are those who defend that system at all costs, usually out of misguided self-interest, be it knowingly or subconsciously. These villains oppress—victimize—children, specifically disadvantaged children, who may be traumatized by discriminatory treatment and left unequipped to succeed in adulthood. Those children need heroes in the form of education reformers who will fight for their interests. For these education reformers, school choice is a tool that liberates disadvantaged children from their oppressive public school systems. Programs like school vouchers make porous the geographic and financial restrictions that entrench educational inequalities (Lueken and McShane 2022).

These emphases and language choices can be seen through the work of many progressive advocates' work. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Fuller claimed his school choice activism is about “how to help people who lack power have power” (Layton 2014). Other activists for disadvantaged children have described their support for school choice in similar ways. John E. Coons, Professor of Law at the University of California at Berkeley School of Law emphasized the equity component of school choice in a 1992 magazine article:

*We still arrange education so that children of the wealthy can cluster in chosen government enclaves or in private schools; the rest get whatever school goes with the*

*residence the family can afford. This socialism for the rich we blithely call “public,” though **no other public service entails such financial exclusivity.** Whether the library, the swimming pool, the highway, or the hospital—if it is “public,” it is accessible. But admission to the government school comes only with the price of the house. If the school is in Beverly Hills or Scarsdale, the poor need not apply.... Choice is the obvious remedy for such maldistribution and discrimination. A system of universal state scholarships, properly designed, would remove the anomaly of the impoverished district and the imposition of state ideology upon dissenters. This is the primary hope for **ending the balkanization of children by race and family wealth.** Choice, indeed, is the specific therapy for every historic pathology of the schools. (Coons 1992, emphasis added)*

Chris Stewart, CEO of the education nonprofit Brightbeam and former Minneapolis School Board member, wrote a quip about the purpose of the public school system in 2020:

*Does it help to tell families like mine that we should concern ourselves more with the impact our school choices have on the system than how the system impacts our children? Further, what good is an **education system that prioritizes its welfare over the welfare of the vulnerable populations** it supposes itself to serve? (Stewart 2020, emphasis added)*

Christina Laster, Director of Policy and Legislation for the National Parents Union, highlights the need for alternative environments when public schools are not safe:

*Black students and their families made a way out of no way by educating themselves outside their local public schools. What about our **children today, who face relentless discrimination at school** without armed troops to protect them? Instead of holding Brown v. Board of Education over our heads, we should learn from the impact it has had and move forward. De facto segregation persists today and the forced integration of generations of children has not produced the desired results: high academic and social-emotional outcomes.... **Children should not be expected to learn and thrive in environments where they are not welcomed, properly taught or even given basic respect.** Removing children from those types of environments often becomes a matter of sanctuary and protection, not a recreation of the segregation of the past.*

(Laster 2021, emphasis added)

These examples demonstrate progressives' focus on traditional public schools as a "system," children who are already economically disadvantaged and/or face racial discrimination, and liberation language around school choice policy. Similar rhetoric may be found in the work of progressive opponents of school choice. Racial and economic discrimination play a key role in both sides' victims, and both supporters and opponents may describe a proper education system as one that liberates children. From an analytical perspective, perhaps the strongest difference between progressive supporters and opponents is the perception of what public schools are—fighting systemic oppression or part of the system itself.

*Conservatism and school choice: Family values*

For conservatives, the family is the “building block of society;” having a healthy culture requires the family unit to be supported and empowered<sup>3</sup> (Kirk 1977). A strong family will train their children to hold and practice values and principles good for themselves and society more broadly. When a child is districted to a particular public school, that child is subject to the curriculum choices, values, and treatment by the school and its administrators. If that school’s choices, beliefs, or actions do not align with what the family values for their child, that public school is threatening the civic order more than developing it. For the sake of their children and the structure of society, parents must be permitted to have their children educated according to their morals, values, priorities, and particular knowledge of their child.

One reason a parent might choose a particular schooling option for their child is to pass on moral values through religious education. Catholic schools rose in the United States as an alternative to the public schools dominated by Protestants (Shuls 2022, van Raemdonck and Maranto 2018, Hess 2010). As public schools secularized, some Protestant sects began their own school networks as well. Even among Protestant Christians, the value in distinct education may be as much cultural as much as religious. The Christian Reformed Church, for example, emphasized its education programs in the United States so its children might maintain their Dutch heritage (VanDam 2007). A parent might seek a specific school for purely academic reasons as well. One who finds their child to be a kinesthetic learner may value a Montessori school for their child. Another parent might find academic options for gifted students lacking

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<sup>3</sup> That the family is the “building block of society” is an idea attributed to Pope John Paul II and popularized by self-identified conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

and want a school that challenges their children. A high school student may desire an institution that specializes in college preparation or technical education. A child may have been bullied in their initial school, prompting their family to want a safe change of scenery for them. Founding all these rationales is the assumption that it is the parent's right and responsibility to choose their child's education, and that they have the resources they need to access that choice.

That foundation is evident in the rhetoric of conservative school choice advocates of many sorts. Patrick T. Brown of the Ethics and Public Policy Center emphasized the relationship between school choice and communal beliefs:

*A conservative educational agenda needs to move beyond choice alone and toward a system of educational pluralism in which government dollars are used to support a multiplicity of schooling options. Pluralism is the norm in many other developed countries, is associated with better academic outcomes, and is a more honest way of delivering education, recognizing authentic differences of opinion on issues of **moral formation**. It differs from a more libertarian, choice-alone approach to education by empowering communities to offer educational options that reflect their diverse **religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds**. It also preserves a role for the state in monitoring schools for some baseline level of academic performance, coupling high standards with authentic diversity in pedagogical styles. (Brown 2021, emphasis added)*

In a 2017 essay, American Enterprise Institute education scholar Robert Pondiscio emphasized parental responsibility to evaluate schooling options based on their values:

*A school's approach to student discipline and classroom management is a profound reflection of somebody's value system. And establishing any value system as a default is a surefire recipe for conflict, even chaos, possibly anarchy. When we seek to establish, valorize, or impose one set of beliefs about student discipline as the "right" one, we are functionally communicating that all others are "wrong." Greene's recognition of the values-laden nature of discipline systems all but begs for choice:*

***Parents should be able to weigh**, as one factor among many, schools whose philosophy about behavior management, classroom culture, and approach to student discipline most closely mirror their own beliefs and practices. (Pondiscio 2017, emphasis added)*

Bobby Jindal oversaw the creation of multiple private school choice programs during his tenure as governor of Louisiana, and school choice was part of the platform of his 2016 presidential run. In a 2018 op-ed, he describe the civic implications of an education system built on parental choice:

*Conservatives, on the other hand, favor a bottom-up approach. For them, economic growth is not the fundamental reason for universal public education—otherwise, employers could simply replace state schools by sponsoring vocational training centers. Rather, they see schools as an **essential element of a self-governing republic**, since citizens must have the critical-thinking skills to hire and fire their leaders.*

(Jindal 2018, emphasis added)

Each of these examples touches on the conservative value of social order. A conservative hero is a good parent trying to raise good children, and a good child makes for a stronger community. Conservatives villainize the immoral, undisciplined, or uncivilized, and they tend to fear or fight such influences on their children's development. Parents may be particularly concerned about secularized education, education that forces cultural assimilation, or inappropriate discipline measures. In each case, the educators who force bad practices onto their children are the enemy. A conservative hero sacrifices whatever is necessary to provide their child the education they need to grow healthily and develop in spirit and mind, or any person that empowers other parents to do the same.

Like progressive school choice opponents, conservatives who fight against school choice have some narrative overlap with their advocate counterparts. However, different policy settings can alter their stories just enough for disagreement. Looking at predominantly red states where school choice legislation has frequently failed (perhaps most notably in Texas), the most skeptical conservatives have been those in rural areas. Rural communities may have a unique perception of traditional public schools. Public schools can be an experience that unifies small communities, and sometimes public schools are the largest employer in a community. For a conservative in such a setting who highly values social order, a first instinct might see choice as a threat rather than an opportunity.

#### *Libertarianism and school choice: Free to choose*

A libertarian celebrates individual freedom, and no one applied an individualistic methodology to education policy quite like University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman.

Friedman often is credited with inventing the concept for school vouchers in the mid-1950s. In line with mainline economics, Friedman approached the education system as a market. For Friedman, a school entitled to the attendance of all children in an arbitrarily defined area was no more than a monopoly, and a monopoly is systematically incentivized to operate inefficiently. For the traditional public school system, inefficiency meant underperforming in its task of educating children (Friedman 1955). Friedman's solution was to disentangle the public financing of education and the public administration of it, instead distributing education funds among the families the education system was designed to serve. Letting parents choose where to send their children to school would disrupt the public monopoly of affordable education through competition, which would incentivize public and private schools alike to improve their services, letting competition raise the level of education quality across all schools.

Arguments about efficiency or education quality are not restricted to the libertarian narrative, nor are libertarian school choice activists confined to arguments based on outcomes. Friedman was essential in identifying the government's role in education, however. While public education began in the earliest days of the United States as an extension of community needs and values (the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647 was created to help ensure children's spiritual salvation, and Horace Mann shaped public education to produce good citizens; see van Raemdonck & Maranto 2018), Friedman reframed the conversation in a way that acknowledged the individual. Education was not an abstract transaction between a faceless government and a homogenous society. Particular schools have particular teachers, and particular families have particular children. Indeed, for the libertarian school choice advocate, it



is the individualistic lens that facilitates a market-based approach to education, and it is the individualistic lens that disfavors laws that restrict individual choices.

While most libertarians are not economists, rhetoric about the freedom and constraint of the individual appears frequently in the work of libertarian school choice advocates. The Cato Institute defines its perspective on choice in education as such:

*What America needs is more educational freedom. Parents must be **free** to choose the education that's best for their kids, no matter where they live or how much they earn. Educators must be **free** to determine their own curricula and methods and free to set their own prices and compensation. Schools must be **free** to innovate and compete to attract and retain students. And they must be both **free** to profit from their successes and compelled to suffer losses for their failures, because the profit-and-loss system spurs innovation, efficiency, and the dissemination of best practices. Likewise, educators must be **free** to compete in the labor market for positions that give them the greatest professional freedom and compensation. (Center for Education Freedom at the Cato Institute, accessed December 2022, emphasis added)*

Libertarian school choice advocates also are keen to view school choice as an alternative approach to broad education policy. Rather than trying to make one school do what one wants, Reason Foundation analyst J.D. Tuccille argues:

*We don't need to wage the curriculum wars at all. Instead, let's **pick** where and how our children are educated, and encourage others to do the same. Then they can*

*hash out their ideas in a **society that remains open** to disagreement and debate.*

(Tuccille 2021, emphasis added)

Kevin Currie-Knight, Associate Professor at East Carolina University, compares education to other areas of social life where he sees choice as more accepted:

*The libertarian cases for choice remind us that education probably isn't different from other arenas of life. Just as people would have good reason to balk at a state news monopoly, we should balk at the public education system for the same reasons. We take it for granted that **choice is valuable in a whole host of areas**, from car and home purchases to lawn and counseling services. Maybe choice in education would provide similar value. (Currie-Knight 2019, emphasis added)*

The libertarian case for school choice begins with the victim: the family without options. The family is constrained by the villain of the story, the government and any interest groups within the government that work to keep choices limited. Heroes are the activists who fight government's self-interested grasp over education and related choices that should be left to individual families.

Table 2 expounds upon Kling's three-axes model by placing his assertions in the context of school choice advocacy.

*Table 2: Three Languages of School Choice Support*

Ideology	Axes	Heroes need school choice because...	Villains oppose school choice because...
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Progressivism	Oppressor- Oppressed	School choice offers children who would be oppressed, dismissed, and forgotten a chance to receive the education they need for self-liberation.	Those in power need the education system to function in ways that maintain their power. Offering opportunity outside of the powerful's control is self-sabotage.
Conservatism	Civilized- Barbarian	School choice provides parents with the ability to educate their children with the religious, moral, and cultural values important to them. Parents know their children best and thus are best equipped to decide how to shape this education.	Immoral people want an irreligious, complacent society and controlling the next generation's education is the most effective way to produce that future. Disrupting the relationship between a parent and their child's education is essential for weakening the moral fabric of society.
Libertarianism	Liberalized- Tyrant	People have a right to do what they want. An education system without free choice is an education system doomed to failure.	It is in the self-interest of government and other political actors (teachers, unions, bureaucracies, etc) to maintain as much power as possible.

Notably, none of the hero or villain characterizations in the three languages of school choice are mutually exclusive. In the abstract, overcoming systemic oppression does not preclude valuing family, community, and social order. Likewise, seeking to empower families and groups does not inherently undermine commitment to individual liberty. Progressive emphasis on the experiences of the marginalized does not necessarily mean conservatives and libertarians do not care about those groups' suffering. Conservative emphasis on the family and local communities does not imply that a progressive or libertarian does not deeply care for theirs. This should not be surprising given the aforementioned *bounded relativity* of policy narratives. Within certain ideological parameters, policy storytellers want their policies to win,

so they shape stories in ways that maximize appeal within those boundaries. A winning story would find villains that most people would find disagreeable, heroes most would appreciate, and victims with whom most could sympathize (see Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011, also see Schattschneider 1960). Importantly, this tendency means the characters highlighted by competing narratives are not mutually exclusive. Multiple policy narratives competing for attention must focus on different heroes and villains because that is the only way multiple narratives can find characters *most* of society agrees with. These differing stories simply shape how each group will influence and respond to political challenges.

### ***Interactions between school choice supporters***

While all three narratives see a lack of educational choice as a problem to overcome, the villain behind the status quo takes on a different color in each language's lens. Oppression, immorality, and coercion often overlap, which is why the school choice coalition can be as diverse as it has been. For instance, a school choice supporter may well envision opponents they believe to fit all three of these villainization tactics: a powerful, self-interested person without respect for a family's values.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, if there was total overlap between the three languages, the school choice coalition would not experience any in-group tension. What, then, is the source of conflict? Sometimes, a political event happens—one tangential to school choice—where one group's hero is another group's villain. Practically speaking, coalition members do not only ever hear

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, may be one of the better examples of a person who has frequently been villainized among all three sub-groups in ways consistent with all three languages of school choice.

from each other when they are speaking about school choice. Particularly with the rise of social media, we can be more in tune than ever with how our school choice allies are reacting to events outside our policy issue.

The overlaps and dissonances between the three languages are practically infinite, and each relationship is worthy of its own analysis. For the sake of demonstrating the source of dissonance within the school choice coalition could look like, I will limit my discussion to the interaction between progressive and conservative school choice advocates.

*Progressive-Conservative overlap: Education is for something*

Both progressive and conservative narratives care deeply about the kind of education children are receiving because they see education as an inherently moral endeavor. The two groups disagree on what that morality looks like, however. Education, for progressives, leads to liberation, and for conservatives, education fosters a civilization bolstered by good religious, cultural, or philosophical values. Either group may be dissatisfied with the default education options presented to them for failing to meet these moral objectives. Progressive and conservative school choice advocates would observe this situation and suggest that introducing accessible schooling alternatives increases the likelihood that progressives' and conservatives' children receive the kind of education they desire.

Some of these education preferences may look similar. For example, both progressive and conservative narratives give reason to pursue rigorous, high-quality education. Progressive education analysis often emphasizes the role education can play in disrupting generational poverty and the school-to-prison pipeline. Conservatives may see academic mastery as a

necessary part of the good life according to their worldview and values. In some cases, success in school is especially important so that children will grow to be successful in the job market and thus provide for families of their own.

Progressives and conservatives also will see villains and heroes in distinct but uncontentious ways. For instance, progressives who are concerned about the lasting oppressive effects of segregation, redlining, and other geography-based socioeconomic barriers may highlight school choice's promise to disentangle educational outcomes from street addresses. Conservatives are relatively less likely to emphasize these examples of systemic oppression. They may instead appreciate educational environments that facilitate religious practices they value. These two examples do not conflict with each other's narratives about school choice.

Potential for conflict between progressive and conservative school choice advocates remains, however. If families, the heroes of conservatives, exercise choices for their children in ways that the progressive narrative would classify as oppressive, the parent transforms from a neutral figure in the progressive school choice advocate's eyes to a villain.

#### *Case study: 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race*

With this framework in mind, one can frequently see political actors in the education reform space using *The Three Languages*. One telltale moment of the conflict between progressive and conservative school choice supporters, for instance, was seen during the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race. Two months before the election, Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin trailed his Democratic opponent, Terry McAuliffe, by about nine percentage points (Wilder and McDougale 2021). During the final debate, the candidates fielded a question asking

whether school policies about gender identity should be enforced at the district or state levels.<sup>5</sup> In an appeal to conservatives, Youngkin redirected the question toward the family, arguing that parents must be included in conversations about such policies. To add weight to his point, Youngkin referenced an incident at a Fairfax County school board meeting involving parents angered after learning about what they found to be sexually explicit material in their school libraries. Youngkin painted himself as an alternative: “You believe school systems should tell children what to do. I believe parents should be in charge of their kids’ education.”

In response, McAuliffe made a communication error that would prove to kill his campaign. “I’m not going to let parents come into schools and actually take books out and make their own decisions.” The former governor reaffirmed that sentiment the next day: “Listen, we have a Board of Education working with the local school boards to determine the curriculum for our schools. You don’t want parents coming in every different school jurisdiction saying this is what should be taught here, and this is what should be taught there” (Walton 2021).

The connection between Youngkin and the conservative narrative is fairly straightforward. In a conversation about agency in education decisions, Youngkin voluntarily introduces parents as necessary decision-makers, appealing to the heroes of the conservative pro-school choice narrative. In contrast, McAuliffe’s response did little more than vilify parents, who are not inherently villains in any common education policy narrative. That his comment

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<sup>5</sup> All information about this gubernatorial debate has been collected from the recorded video, published by C-SPAN (2021).

was widely seen as a campaign killer should be no surprise, as there likely is little upside to antagonizing one narrative and appealing to no others.

Why, then, was this McAuliffe versus Youngkin moment a point of tension between progressive and conservative school choice advocates? If there were only philosophical arguments at play, there would be no tension. After all, disagreements about the relationship between families and the state are nothing new. But understanding the different political languages people speak highlights a crucial element to this moment that most headlines did not pick up.

Shortly before he villainized the conservative hero, McAuliffe addressed the plight of the progressive victim. This portion of the debate revolved around school policies related to transgender students and students otherwise gender non-conforming, sparked by McAuliffe's campaign promises to protect these students from discrimination and disrespect. While not a school choice policy specifically, such a promise resonates with the overarching meta-narrative of progressive school choice advocates, which heroizes those who fight for oppressed people (Walton 2022).

Though Youngkin did not reference LGBTQ or gender non-conforming children specifically, his emphasis on parental involvement could be perceived to interfere with progressives' desire to protect vulnerable students. Under this interpretation, parents become political obstacles to protecting an oppressed group. For a progressive school choice advocate observing this conflict between McAuliffe and Youngkin, the candidate who supported school choice (Youngkin) may well sound more like a villain.



### **Discussion: A Way Forward**

The heroes and villains of the three languages of school choice do not inherently conflict with each other. So long as that remains true, it is possible for progressive, conservative, and libertarian supporters to collaborate and produce political success. To a large degree, coalition members themselves will decide whether this happens. Recalling the concept of bounded relativity from earlier, the degree to which someone is willing to adapt their policy narrative for political advantage is limited. Villainizing one's core heroes generally is a step too far, as it undermines one's reason for having the policy preference in the first place. If coalition partners put increasing pressure on each other to vilify and heroize the "wrong" people, the price of remaining in the coalition could get too high. It is possible to support school choice and withdraw from the movement. If speaking a certain political language becomes a litmus test or social requirement for actively participating in the coalition, the school choice movement is prone to splinter.

If a parent threatens to add to the oppression of marginalized groups, a progressive will see that parent as a villain. As such, if a group of parents fights for a policy that progressives find to be oppressive to those groups, parents as a class will become villains. At that point, messaging school choice as a parents' rights issue will not rally progressive school choice supporters and, contrary to intention, weaken the school choice coalition. On the other hand, if progressives value the social impact of an education policy more than a parent's agency in raising their child, then highly emphasizing equity language may make conservative school choice supporters wary. Again, this may unintentionally weaken the coalition.

If school choice advocates wish to maximize their reach, they can reference the three languages of school choice to anticipate what kind of tactics and messaging can be self-sabotaging to their partnerships.

The first step for advocates who wish to strengthen the school choice coalition is to become politically multilingual. If progressive, conservative, and libertarian school choice supporters have entirely different ways of communicating not only about education issues but also political matters altogether, it will remain difficult for these groups to coordinate strategy and solve political challenges in self-sustainable manners.

To extend the language metaphor, the human body is trained to quickly identify threats, and it often takes shortcuts to identify those threats. Historically, one of the fastest ways one could know whether a person was not part of your trusted community was by hearing them speak an unfamiliar language (Kling 2013). Even today, when willingly traveling to a foreign country, it can feel disempowering to an inexperienced traveler to not be able to immediately interpret the meaning or intention behind people's words.

When reviewing pro-school choice messages from progressives, conservatives, and libertarians, certain words appear more frequently among certain groups. Conservatives are less likely to use terms like "oppression," and progressives tend not to select terms like "liberty." For reasons far outside the school choice debate, conservatives associate "oppression"-based thought with Marxism and, by extension, communism. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, "liberty" has historically been a concept used by some Americans as a justification for exploitative behavior.

Becoming politically multilingual requires effort both as a listener and a speaker. A politically multilingual listener is able to hear the speaker on their own terms. The listener overcomes immediate biases or associations with certain terms or concepts and instead adapts those of the speaker. Rather than assuming a term or piece of rhetoric is shorthand for some other, less desirable belief, taking the speaker at their word or clarifying meaning is sure to maintain more partnerships. As a speaker, it is easier to be understood when you speak the audience's language. It is faster to persuade someone of your policy position directly than to first attract them to your overall political perspective before explaining how that political perspective leads to your policy.

The school choice coalition does not need to become a group of chameleons, but simply knowing the political narrative a partner inhabits eases one's ability to hear, categorize, and understand what the partner is communicating. Just as the human body is trained to identify foreign language as potential danger, hearing someone speak the same language is an immediate, subconscious sign that the person is safe (Kling 2013). More knowledge of other languages of school choice helps overcome the immediate human instinct to retreat or fight, an essential skill for strengthening a politically diverse coalition in a polarized era.

Once this understanding is in place, supporters may collaboratively develop advocacy strategies that are both effective for the school choice cause and supportive of the multilingual partnership. One possible hermeneutic school choice supporters could explore is minimizing negative characterizations altogether. While this may seem naïve in a political culture dominated by affective polarization, there is research that suggests simply avoiding negative characterizations of people valued by a political opponent both increases the duration of

interaction and the positivity of that interaction (Marchal 2022). Employing this strategy would require advocates to be careful in whom they choose to villainize and direct the school choice fight against. While supporters fluent in one school choice language need not adopt the heroes of another, employing this strategy would demand supporters avoid negative communication about other narratives' heroes. A second lens advocates could use is maintaining focus on children as much as possible. Each of the three narratives have placed children or students as victims of the status quo. Focusing messaging on this common sympathetic character should both communicate and foster unity within the movement.

The examples chosen in this analysis draw heavily upon recent developments in education politics. Political environments shift frequently and rapidly, which means political storytellers shaping the narratives of progressive, conservative, and libertarian school choice supporters will continue to change. The partnership between these groups will only be maintained so long as they prioritize their common interest in creating school choice policies over a need to villainize according to their narrative.

### **Conclusion**

Each school choice advocate has a policy narrative that they use, either intentionally or subconsciously, to explain their support. Generally, those narratives will fall into one of three "meta-narratives" that describe who the heroes, victims, and villains are in American society. While there is nothing inherently contradictory about these various narratives finding a home in the school choice movement, different subgroups may unintentionally cause or interpret

distress, hostility, or threat by how they communicate politically. Advocates can minimize rifts if they:

- Familiarize themselves with *The Three Languages of School Choice*, learning how the movement fits within core ideological ideas;
- overcome the human instinct to immediately distrust those who use different language and characterizations from us;
- contextualize their arguments within a partner's policy narrative, when appropriate;
- cut out negative characterizations; and
- emphasize their narratives' positive characterizations.

These tools can help the coalition overcome these stumbling blocks and capitalize on the momentum school choice is experiencing right now.

As a caveat, no member of the school choice coalition has a right to another's audience. In any large movement, there are sure to be some actors using the movement for selfish or distasteful gains. I do not wish to pressure the reader to befriend any particularly untrustworthy actor that may be in their mind. I contend, however, that because the movement is as successful as it is because it stands on the shoulders of politically diverse giants, your fellow advocates with beliefs you just cannot wrap your mind around might deserve the benefit of the doubt. *The Three Languages of School Choice* can be a tool to help find strong, good-hearted partners where you might not have looked—or heard—before. With any luck, others will do the same to you. Should the school choice coalition maintain its allyships in a political era as polarized as this, nationwide education transformation remains in sight.

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**Note**

This EdChoice working paper continues the work started in "The Three Languages of School Choice: A Narrative Policy Framework Toward Better Conversations About Education Freedom," a paper published in a special edition of the *Journal of School Choice* (2023). You may see this paper on the web page for the *Journal of School Choice*, hosted by Taylor & Francis Online. Where that article sought in part to demonstrate how analyzing the school choice coalition could contribute to the academic literature on the narrative policy framework, this working paper is directed to a broader audience of school choice advocates and policy wonks. Both versions stem from the same motivation, understanding how language and stories impact the progress of school choice policy in the United States.

**About the Author**

John M. Kristof is a Senior Research Analyst at EdChoice, where he studies school choice, educational pluralism, education finance, public opinion, and related education policy topics. With the Research and Thought Leadership team, he analyzes school choice programs and their relationships with the broader education ecosystem, designs and analyzes statewide surveys of K-12 parents and school leaders, manages the organization's data collection for private school choice programs, and analyzes EdChoice polling work. John also enjoys exploring how policy theory can illuminate conflicts and coalitions in the education reform space. His writing regularly appears on the EdChoice blog and other education and opinion outlets. Prior to EdChoice, John was the Lawrence M. Borst Fellow at the Indiana General Assembly, where he provided research support for issues including education finance, special education, teacher compensation, child poverty, and other education and fiscal matters. John holds a Master of Public Affairs degree in Policy Analysis from Indiana University, where he studied the relationship between charter school competition and traditional public school finances. He received a bachelor's degree in Economics and Humanities from Indiana Wesleyan University, where he also was a John Wesley Honors Scholar.