

## TRIBUTE

# Jack Coons: School Choice Champion

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Jack Coons has championed family choice in education for more than 40 years (Coons, Clune, & Sugarman, 1969). Throughout this period he has been unwavering in his belief that empowering families to have an important role in deciding where and how their children are educated is good for both children and parents (Coons, & Sugarman, 1977; Coons, Mnookin, & Sugarman, 1993). The school choice mechanisms Jack has endorsed have always been carefully tailored to assure genuine choice to families who are financially disadvantaged, primarily working class and lower-income families (Coons, & Sugarman, 1971; Sugarman & Coons, 1980; Coons & Sugarman, 1992c; Coons & Sugarman, 1999).

These core values have put Jack somewhat at odds with supporters of school choice whose main goals are reducing public spending on education and/or achieving higher test score results through competition among schools. These economic efficiency and antigovernment arguments in favor of school choice are typically associated with Milton Friedman's school of thought and do not reflect the egalitarian values that are central to Jack's work.

This divide between Jack and Milton may be best explained by the way Jack first came to favor family choice in education. In the late 1960s and early 1970s he spearheaded what became a national litigation campaign to change the way public schools are funded (Coons, Clune, & Sugarman, 1970). Jack's motivation for promoting this reform was rooted in the belief that the quality of education a child receives should not be a function of the wealth of the school district in which the child happens to live (especially since moving homes to a wealthier school district was and remains a meaningless option for so many families). Yet, at that time (and in many states still today) wealthy school districts systematically spent more money on their pupils even while asking their taxpayers to make a relatively smaller effort to support public education. Simply put, rich districts could and did readily outspend poor districts even when the poor districts tried harder by taxing their far more meager property tax base at a higher rate.

Full state funding of public education at a uniform level in all districts (adjusted perhaps for differential costs and needs from place to place) was one possible remedy to this wealth-based inequality, but not the only one. "District power equalizing"—a new approach to public school funding that sought, through revised state aid formulas, to make all school districts effectively equal in wealth per pupil—was another. This way the same tax "effort" would everywhere yield the same spending per pupil. Notice that while this reform embodies a commitment to eliminating the advantage of wealth it does not blunt the desire of communities to spend more on their schools so long as they are willing to make a greater tax effort. Both full state funding and district power equalizing have been embraced in many states in the intervening years.

Still untried is yet a further school finance reform that Jack endorsed starting in 1970: "family power equalizing." In the name of the "subsidiarity" principle, family power equalizing would, in effect, make every family a separate school district whose spending on its children's education would reflect not the family's wealth but rather the parents' willingness to make a financial effort on behalf of their offspring. Family power equalizing also meant that parents, not school officials, would decide where their children were educated, but freed from the normal burdens of inequalities in family income. Family power equalizing, in effect, brought Jack to school choice and to school vouchers.

Jack quickly concluded that a regime like family power equalizing should not restrict the family to selecting among public schools. Private school options, including religious schools, he argued, should also be financially available to all families. By 1978, his main focus shifted away from public school district finance reform to the general funding of elementary and secondary education through a regime committed to school choice (Coons & Sugarman, 1992a, 1992b).

In the intervening years, the "choice" principle has substantially captured public education. Today, charter schools, magnet schools, alternative schools, intradistrict school transfers, interdistrict transfers, small schools-within-schools, and all-choice public school districts increasingly give families options as to where their children are educated without having to move their place of residence. In short, within the public sector Jack's approach to family choice has been increasingly embraced.

Yet, few governments in the United States have financially empowered lower income families to select private schools, even though this option is commonplace in many other nations. Especially because of the growing charter school movement, families seeking a wide range of non-religious school choices for their children can increasingly obtain what they want at a public school and at public expense. But those preferring religious schools remain largely excluded from this regime. This outcome

is explained, not by constitutional limitations, but by a combination of America's political commitment to the separation of church and state, the strength of the teacher unions, and the insufficiency of private-market justifications on their own to generate legislative adoption of school voucher plans.

If more than a handful of jurisdictions in the United States are to expand family choice in education to include the provision of scholarships to needy families wanting to use religious schools, support will have to come from Americans who are politically on the left and in the center. And this support will have to arise from a wider embrace of Jack's commitment to trust and empower all families—not just well-to-do families—to select the schooling they think is best for their children. To that end, even in retirement from academia, Jack has helped launch and currently serves as President of the American Center for School Choice, a new organization that is founded on Jack's core values ([www.amcsc.org](http://www.amcsc.org)).

I have had the privilege of having Jack as my mentor since 1964 and the honor of coauthoring a wide range of books and articles with him during this nearly half a century. If we look back to the 1960s to when Jack and I first began to work together, we see that there has been a dramatic change in America's vision of K–12 education. Rather than pretending to provide the same “common” schooling for all children, much of America now offers alternatives that allow parents to best match their choice of school (or program within a school) to their child's needs. This change is importantly attributable to Jack's long and untiring efforts.

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