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Lots of Reasons to Celebrate National School Choice Week

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This week marks National School Choice Week (NSCW) and efforts to empower parents to choose the best public or private education option for their children. NSCW comes at perfect time given recent news about student performance and politics in the classroom.

In December, scores for the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) were released. PISA is a worldwide exam administered every three years that measures mathematics, reading and science knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in 72 countries. The underperformance of U.S. students raised deep concerns.

In math, the performance of U.S. students dropped significantly. From 2012 to 2015, the average math score for U.S. students fell by 11 points, which resulted in the U.S. ranking tumbling down from 28th to 35th. U.S. students performed below the worldwide average in math.

In reading and science, U.S. scores also dipped slightly from 2012 to 2015. In reading, the U.S. trailed countries like Slovenia, while in science the U.S. lagged behind Portugal.

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have been imposed on most public schools in the U.S. The Common Core standards took effect over the time period between the 2012 and 2015 administrations of the PISA exams.

As student performance has fallen, politicization of the nation's classrooms has risen.

For instance, hyperbolic comparisons of Donald Trump to Adolf Hitler took place in classrooms coast to coast. In Mountain View, California, a history teacher was suspended after he lectured students on the parallels between the rise of Trump and Hitler.

In San Francisco, the teachers union put out an anti-Trump lesson plan that was sent to all teachers in the city's school district. One exercise described Trump supporters as "those who dehumanize" students. The resources recommended by the plan include articles, reports and videos by notorious hardcore leftist publications, organizations and individuals such as *Mother Jones* magazine, the Southern Poverty Law Center and producer/director Michael Moore.

Even worse, California's new history and social studies curriculum framework is weighted overwhelmingly toward a liberal viewpoint on subject matter to be studied, with an emphasis on left-wing identity politics and social movements, and no balanced treatment of conservative figures and ideas. However, since it is the state's curriculum framework, this bias will be systemic throughout California's public schools and will likely affect other states that use textbooks that cater to California's large market.

Whether it is because their children are attending failing public schools or because their children are being indoctrinated by the biased political agenda of government school systems, parents have a right to exit schools that do not meet the needs of their children and should

be empowered to choose the schooling option that is right for their individual child.

Last year saw some huge strides made in giving parents greater choice. For example, the Nevada Supreme Court validated the state's new universal education-savings-account program. Under the program, the state deposits funds in individual accounts that parents can access to pay for non-public education expenses, including tutoring and private school tuition.

Perhaps the most important point addressed by the Nevada court was the issue of the state's so-called Blaine amendment, which prohibits public funding of religious institutions. The court said, "Once public funds are deposited into an education savings account, the funds are no longer 'public funds' but are instead the private funds of the individual parent who established the account." "Any decision by the parent," emphasized the court, "to use the funds in his or her account to pay tuition at a religious school does not involve the use of 'public funds' and does not implicate [the state's Blaine amendment]."

Blaine amendments, which are included in state constitutions in California and elsewhere, have been used to block many school-choice programs. While the Nevada Supreme Court ruling will not control in cases in other states, it provides a crucial argument for school-choice supporters in overcoming Blaine amendment obstacles.

In California, official proclamations recognizing National School Choice Week have been passed in conservative bastions like El Dorado County and in liberal hotbeds such as West Hollywood. Every child, no matter where they live, should have access to effective education options. California can do better by looking to cutting-edge states like Nevada and giving wide-ranging schooling options to all parents and their children.