

[**Op-Ed: Modest proposal for school choice**](http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2017/03/op_ed_modest_proposal_for_school_choice)

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St. Patrick’s Day is a time to remember perhaps the greatest piece of satire ever written in the English language. Irishman Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” brilliantly skewered the heartless attitudes of 18th-century British aristocrats with an essay about easing the economic troubles of Ireland’s poor by allowing the Irish to sell their children as food for the rich.

The genius of “A Modest Proposal” was Swift’s ability to vividly evoke the desperate condition of the masses while appearing to focus solely on the convenience of the wealthy. “A young healthy child well nursed,” he wrote, “is, at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled. …”

Few in the 21st century would be openly callous about the plight of the needy, but we still deny poor and minority Massachusetts citizens the educational opportunity that is the key to upward mobility.

Consider the Catholic schools that have long provided a path to prosperity for children of less-affluent families. The commonwealth’s Catholic schools are among the nation’s best, but two amendments to the state Constitution, the legacy of 19th-century anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bigotry, eliminate parochial education as an option for many Massachusetts families by preventing state funds from going to parents who choose to send their children to religious schools.

The commonwealth’s charter public schools educate a disproportionate number of poor and minority children. Study after study has found that they dramatically outperform traditional public schools, effectively close the achievement gap between more privileged and poorer students, and do a better job of educating limited English proficient and special needs students. But the defeat last fall of a contentious statewide ballot initiative limits needy families’ access to high-quality charter schools.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, or Metco, which allows some 3,300 Boston and Springfield children to attend school in surrounding districts. More than three-quarters of the program’s students are African-American or Latino, about half are low-income and around a quarter have special needs.

Metco students have much higher graduation rates than their Boston and Springfield peers and 90 percent go on to post-secondary education. Yet funding was cut by 18 percent between 2007 and 2014 and the program can only accommodate 350 to 400 new students each year, leaving it with a two- to five-year waiting list.

Two centuries after Jonathan Swift, the Irish-American writer Flannery O’Connor asserted, “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”

The stark reality is that the commonwealth’s traditional public schools still serve middle-class and wealthy students far better than they do the less fortunate. So here’s another modest proposal: Instead of continuing to ask lower-income families to wait a couple more decades while we try to change that, let’s resolve this St. Patrick’s Day to provide the current generation of poor and minority children in Massachusetts with access to proven, higher-quality educational options.

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