



School Choice Legislation and “The Valley of Death”

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By: James V. Shuls

Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

All in the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!

Charge for the guns!” he said.

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

From “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

On a warm evening at the end of May, I sat in a cramped office in an industrial park. It was after work hours, so there wasn’t much commotion at the truck rental or plumbing supply businesses located across the street. The building was not much to look at, but what was going on inside was priceless.

The room was packed full of parents and school children who were itching to get out of the uniforms they had been wearing all day. We were gathered that evening for our school’s “spring sharing,” where students display their artwork and offer recitations. Hearing my four-year-old and six-year-old recite poetry from memory filled my heart. But nothing could top my feeling of pride when my 13-year-old took the floor with his classmates.

They began with the “St. Crispin’s Day Speech” from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. That speech

has long been one of my favorites. Next, in a choral performance, the students recited “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The poem depicts a military blunder from the Crimean War, a battle few today know anything about. There was my son, reciting every word.

Weeks earlier, my three boys and I went on a school trip to Kansas City. While visiting the World War I museum, we stood on the glass walkway above the 9,000 poppies, each representing 1,000 military personnel who died in the war. The children, led by their teachers, joined together in reciting “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae.

Some may ask, “What’s the benefit of having children memorize poems and speeches such as these?” Anyone who heard the voices of 30 children honoring the fallen soldiers understands the importance.

At our kid’s previous school, they attempted to teach kids character skills directly. Our first grader once brought home a coloring sheet with a superhero wearing a cape emblazoned with the word “Yet!” They were trying to teach perseverance and grit.

While these are wonderful traits to teach to children, we learn much more from the lessons of history, from the beauty of poetry, and from the trials of those who have gone before us than we will ever learn from a coloring page. Our new school is exactly what my wife and I had been looking for. To us, this is what education should be.

Few, however, will get to experience this type of education in our state—our school is a private school.

Indeed, many in the public education lobby have been patting themselves on the back for preventing school choice policies from passing this past legislative session. Charter school expansion never received a vote, and Empowerment Scholarship Accounts legislation was filibustered on the Senate floor.

It’s sad that people are excited about denying parents a chance to find a school that is the perfect fit for their family.

It still isn’t clear today who was responsible for the failure in the charge of light brigade—it seems that miscommunication led 600 men into the valley of death. We have no doubt, however, who blocked school choice legislation in Missouri because they won’t stop applauding themselves.

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