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Freedom's Champion: Professor Milton Freidman, 1912-2006

The world lost a giant with the recent death of Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman. Friedman's parents were penniless Romanian immigrants; his father a handcart merchant and his mother a garment "sweat shop" worker. These modest beginnings produced arguably the greatest economist of the last century and are a tribute to the power of freedom and markets - causes Friedman championed throughout his remarkable life.

After attaining a Princeton Ph.D. Friedman taught at the University of Chicago and established the "Chicago School" which dominates modern economic thought: free markets and competition produce the greatest social welfare. Chicago is the world's No. 1 economics graduate program, producing an amazing 23 Nobel laureates with Chicago ties. Even I can claim to be one of his students after struggling through the dense mathematical models in Friedman's "Price Theory" text while a graduate student.



Photo submitted

Joe Baker and Milton Friedman smile in this undated photo

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After reading Milton and his wife Rose's joint 1998 autobiography, "Two Lucky People," I felt compelled to write Professor Friedman thanking him for his lifetime spent promoting freedom and contributions to economic science. I was shocked to

receive a letter from Dr. Friedman thanking me. Professor Friedman visited Utah to promote school choice. Meeting him was one of my greatest thrills. Friedman's choice campaign lives on through the Friedman Foundation at friedmanfoundation.org on the Internet.

First proposed by Friedman in 1955, choice is a natural extension of Chicago School principles of freedom and markets and has dramatically improved K-12 education. The idea is simple but incredibly powerful: Interject competition by allowing parents freedom to choose which private or public school their children attend with government funding

following the students. Friedman's idea is remarkably successful. Choice thrives throughout the United States, producing significantly improved public and private student achievement, lower taxpayer cost and happy parents.

Alas, powerful forces are aligned against this extension of freedom to parents. Utah's K-12 education monopoly serves students and taxpayers poorly but works quite well for entrenched monopoly interests, e.g. the Utah Education Association, state school boards, education bureaucracy. To preserve monopoly control, these politically powerful interests wage an ongoing battle against choice.

Which better serves consumers, competitive markets or monopoly? Utah's K-12 monopoly has absorbed decades of increased resources with no evidence of improved achievement. Mr. Mildenhall (letter Nov. 21) blames the absence of improvement on parents. Mr. Mildenhall is wrong about per-pupil funding, which has tripled since 1960 (NCES inflation-adjusted Utah data: 1960 \$2,104; 2005 \$6,185.) If Utah schools are so resource-starved, why does district administrative staff grow almost three times faster than enrollment?

Mr. Mildenhall speaks of dishonesty. What about UEA's dishonest campaign that choice harms public schools? Perhaps Mr. Mildenhall or the UEA can document evidence of harm in school districts where choice currently exists. They will not because they can not.

What better way to honor Professor Friedman than for our legislature to put parents and students ahead of the monopoly and pass a choice bill this year. Freedom, after all, is a good thing.

Joe Baker is a resident of Cedar City.

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