BHI Policy Paper: To promote public interest, state government should break up teacher union monopolies; An idea as old as the Boston Tea Party

BOSTON – The education of children, long considered vital to democracy and self-rule, is subject to a union monopoly for which there is no justification. This is the major thesis of a new paper released today by the Beacon Hill Institute and the Tuerck Foundation entitled, A Monopoly Against Our Children: Teachers Unions vs. American Ideals.

Drawing upon the antipathy the original Boston Tea Partiers held toward monopolies that curbed competition and surveying the history of public schooling in Massachusetts, author Cornelius Chapman forcefully argues that no justification exists for the purchase of educational services from one private group. Since the nation’s founding, state and local governments, as single-buyers, carefully established monopolies for public goods such as toll roads or liquor cartels. Such efforts to curb competition could be justified on efficiency grounds, expediting road traffic or curbing externalities from alcohol consumption. A monopoly over public education, on the other hand cannot be justified on such grounds because other entities -- such a private and charter schools -- can provide services.

“There is no countervailing public interest that militates in favor of the grant of exclusive rights to educate children at public expense to a single group,” writes Chapman. “No benefit is gained by reducing the quantity of educational services to such consumers, and there is no known social harm that results from excess consumption of such services.”

There are several policy changes that could introduce competition: limiting collective bargaining to wages and working conditions; term-limiting contracts; and curbing mandatory union dues. Including K through 12 education among those services which must be procured through competitive bidding is another solution. “By allowing competing providers an opportunity to present proposals for the operation of local schools, the current elevation of the rights of the producers of K through 12 education over those of the consumers of those services—namely, children and their parents—would be aligned with democratic values,” adds Chapman.