



Children's Lives Are Wasting

By Deborah D. Thornton

“We must find common ground on this issue...children’s lives are wasting as we dawdle.”¹
– New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, Iowa Governor’s Education Summit, July 2011

“Common ground on this issue,” said Governor Christie. What issue? The issue of education. The issue of providing opportunities for our children to learn to their highest abilities. The issue of ensuring that all children in Iowa are offered and receive the best education possible. All Iowans have a vested interest in providing our children with a good education.

Parents have a key role, as they have the final responsibility. Parents must remember that they have the right to demand that schools provide the education their children deserve. Unfortunately, too many parents and community members do not make those demands. Most think their children are learning the things they need to know, only to later find out that they did not. Only to find out that their child’s time has been wasted.

One of the things Governor Christie was specifically talking about is “school choice.” School choice is not about doing away with government schools. It’s not about cutting funding or doing away with teacher’s unions. It’s not about race or income levels. It is about making all schools better, about giving all families the freedom to ride the education train wherever and however they want. The freedom to choose the best school to meet their individual child’s needs. This school might be government, private, charter, religious, secular, or even homeschooling. School choice is simply a choice by the parents for their child. All elected officials, from the local school board to the President of the Iowa Senate to the President of the Iowa School Board Association should be able to support this common approach.

Parents of upper-middle-class children, whether white or minority, generally have the ability and option of ensuring their children receive the best education possible. Many parents pay for private lessons and tutoring in everything from piano to Spanish. They research schools and may specifically move to a better district, buy a house in a better neighborhood.

For example, Rahm Emanuel (Democrat), Mayor of Chicago, was recently asked about his decision to send his three children to the University of Chicago Laboratory School – known as one of the best private schools in the city – instead of enrolling them in the Chicago government schools. The Chicago government schools have many serious issues, including high dropout rates, low achievement, and violent crime.

The reporter, Mary Ann Ahern of NBC News, asked whether or not Emanuel was “confident enough in the public school system to send his own children there.”² Emanuel responded, “The decision I’m going to make as it relates to my kids, is one I’m going to make as a father.”³ He continued, “You’re asking me a value statement and not a policy. ... My children are my children. You have to understand that I’m making this decision as a father and that’s a decision I’m going to make. Anything less than that would be less than how I think of myself and want to be as a father.”⁴

Let me repeat: he said, “I’m making this decision as a father.” Further, he indicated that anything less than paying the money for a private school would represent him doing less than his best as a father, providing his children with less than the best available. Emanuel’s decision was a “value statement,” one all parents would like to be able to make, but often can not.

In fact, most Iowans would probably not be able to send their children to the University of Chicago Laboratory School. The annual tuition for high school is \$24,870, plus fees and extras potentially totaling

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another \$1,300.⁵ Mayor Emanuel is paying upwards of \$75,000 a year for the education of three children. There are private scholarships, but no publicly funded scholarships, available to any child. Arne Duncan (Democrat), the U.S. Secretary of Education, also sent his children to the Chicago Laboratory School. Most recent U.S. Presidents, including Barack Obama, have chosen to send their children to private schools. All had the means to pay the cash. Most Americans do not.

The University of Chicago Laboratory School is certainly an excellent choice. Of the 450 students in the high school, 99 percent of graduates go on to four-year colleges. There are 50 teachers and over 150 different courses offered. The mean ACT composite score for the class of 2011 was 29.9 of a possible 36. There were 12 national merit semi-finalists and another 18 commended students out of the 120-member graduating class.⁶ Mayor Emanuel's children are attending school with some of the brightest students in the Chicago area. Shouldn't all children have that opportunity, irrespective of how much money their parents make?

While speaking at Governor Branstad's Education Summit, Christie elaborated, "We can decide today that the interest of these children is more important than how we decide political winning and losing... To say that change is necessary does not mean that you hate public education. Forget about who you want to blame... Let's put that aside and let's see what we can agree on," Christie said. "Can't we agree that there is failure? There is failure, and that failure has real-life ramifications for those children. They're the ones whose future is restricted."⁷

Christie said parents should not be blamed for the failure either. "That's a response I hear all the time from opponents of real reform," he said. "Are you really willing to live in a world that places failure as the only option at the feet of a child who can't pick his or her parent? We owe it to every child... to give them every opportunity for greatness," he said. "Why is it that we still operate a system that does not reward excellence and does not give consequences for failure?"

"This is not a Republican or Democrat issue, this issue of choice. It is an economic issue," Christie said. "... Why should that choice just be limited to me and Rahm Emanuel and other people of means?" He finished, "We must find common ground on this issue and... children's lives are wasting as we dawdle."⁸

Governor Branstad's Education Reform proposal contains many good ideas. However, it does not fully address school choice and move to implement school choice initiatives such as expanded or liberal open enrollment. As the Legislature begins to consider revisions, they should add expanded school choice provisions. Children's lives are wasting.

Public Interest Institute's POLICY STUDY, "We Must Find Common Ground, Children's Lives Are Wasting," can be viewed at <http://www.limitedgovernment.org/publications/pubs/studies/ps-11-8.pdf>.

(Endnotes)

¹ O. Kay Henderson, "Chris Christie: let's 'find unity' on education reform," July 25, 2011, <<http://okhenderson.com/2011/07/25/chris-christie-lets-find-unity-on-education-reform-audio/>> accessed on August 23, 2011.

² Mary Ann Ahern, "When Rahm's Temper Made a Comeback," NBC News Chicago, July 21, 2011, <<http://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/When-Rahms-Temper-Made-a-Comeback-125919838.html>> accessed on August 24, 2011.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Andrew J. Coulson, "Rahm Emanuel Practices School Choice... Grouchily," Cato@Liberty, July 21, 2011, <<http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/rahm-emanuel-practices-school-choice-grouchily/>> accessed on August 24, 2011.

⁵ "Schedule of Tuition 2011-2012 School Year," The University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, <<http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/admission/tuition/index.aspx>> accessed on August 26, 2011.

⁶ University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, "2010-2011 High School Profile," University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, <http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/data/files/gallery/HighSchoolProgramGallery/ucls_hs_profile.pdf> accessed on August 25, 2011.

⁷ Henderson.

⁸ Ibid.

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