



Give Choice A Chance

by Amy K. Frantz

President Bush has proposed an education reform plan that demands accountability and follows up with consequences. Schools will be required to test to determine whether students are learning and schools are making progress, although much discretion about which tests to use will be given to the states. Failing schools will get assistance, but if they cannot improve, students will be given federal education funds to use at the school of their choice.

The last portion of the plan is drawing the most criticism, even though the school choice option is more of a last resort than a complete overhaul of our educational system, and federal funds make up only about ten percent of K-12 public school funding.¹

The U.S. Congress will ultimately determine what, if any, education reform plan is sent back to President Bush for his consideration. What are their views on school choice? Last year, The Heritage Foundation conducted a survey to determine how members of Congress personally feel about school choice by asking whether or not they send their own children to public or private schools. Eighty-six percent of the members of the House of Representatives and 93 percent of the members of the Senate responded to Heritage's survey.²

The Heritage Foundation study revealed that among those who responded and have school-age children, 40 percent of the members of the House of Representatives and 49 percent of Senators send or have sent at least one child to a private school. The numbers are even higher for those members of Congress who serve on committees with jurisdiction over education issues. Sixty-one percent of the Senate Finance Committee members and 43 percent of the House Ways and Means Committee members send or have sent their children to a private school.³

Members of Congress who send their children to private schools should not be condemned. If they feel that is what is best for their children, they have that choice. But why not give that option to as many parents as we can whose children are caught in schools that don't work?

Rather than hurting public schools, the last-resort option of a voucher plan may inspire failing schools to change. This has already happened in two states that allow limited voucher programs.

“At Milwaukee's Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, which was losing students and funding to neighboring private schools through the city's voucher program, county administrators hired a new principal who instituted an intensive reading program that raised the school's scores, once among the lowest in town, to above the city's

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average. In Escambia County, Florida, where failing test scores at two schools triggered the state's voucher program, principals initiated small-group tutoring, required parent-teacher conferences, and extended the school year by 30 days. By year's end, both schools had raised their test scores enough to remove the voucher threat.⁴

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) was formed last year "to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase educational options for Black children."⁵ Its Executive Director, Kaleem Caire, wants to see more choices for low-income parents and students. "We need to focus our energies on what's best for young people and not put all of our eggs in the basket of what's best for an institution...Parental school choice already is widespread in America, just not for poor Americans."⁶ BAEO has an ongoing television and radio campaign to educate Americans about school choice and the benefits voucher programs can provide to students by featuring real parents talking about how school choice has helped their families.

Not all public schools are bad; some are quite good. Many children attend a public school in grades K-12 and receive an excellent education. But not all students are as lucky.

Some critics say that vouchers are wrong because not all students in failing schools can find other schools to accept them, or vouchers don't cover the complete cost of every private school. But should we help none because we may not be able to help all? Should the captain of the Titanic have let all his passengers drown because he didn't have enough lifeboats for every passenger? No. We should do what we can to help as many as we can to succeed, not condemn all students in a failing school to failure. We should not be afraid to give school choice a chance.

ENDNOTES:

¹Babington, Charles, "Bush Presents Education Plan, Downplays Vouchers," *Washington Post Online Extras*, January 23, 2001.

²Shokraii Rees, Nina, and Jennifer Garrett, "How Members of Congress Practice School Choice," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, June 14, 2000, p. 1. This publication can be found at www.heritage.org/library/backgrounder/bg1377.html.

³*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴"Easy Choice," *The New Republic*, September 11, 2000, p. 11.

⁵The BAEO Mission, www.baeoonline.org

⁶Clowes, George A., "Growing Black Alliance Promotes Choice," Heartland Institute's *School Reform News*, January 2001.

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