

An Interview with Sol Stern

author of Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice by Louis J. Giovino

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Louis Giovino, director of communications, recently interviewed Sol Stern, author of Breaking Free: Public School Lessons and the Imperative of School Choice (Encounter Books). Here is an excerpt from their exchange:

Louis Giovino: Can you talk about your background?

Sol Stern: I grew up in the Bronx. I'm actually an immigrant. I came to the U.S. from Israel as a three year old actually before Israel was a state. My parents were originally German refugees to Palestine and then we came here.

I was working for city government, and all of a sudden my two kids are getting ready to go to the public schools because we were public school supporters. But what I saw...led me to begin to take on this public school system in terms of trying to understand what it is that produced these outrageous things that I saw happening in my kid's schools—everything from derelict teachers who couldn't be fired, to the kinds of issues in terms of the subtle, political indoctrination—the left wing tilt in the schools. That's how I got into this business.

Louis Giovino: How did you come to the conclusion that Catholic schools are better than public schools?

Sol Stern: First of all, I don't make the general conclusion that Catholic schools are better than public schools. In fact, a lot research indicates that at the upper levels... there is no indication that Catholic schools are outperforming.

It's in fact at the middle range or even lower than the middle range. It is difficult to educate kids in the inner city.

Clearly there is tremendous evidence that Catholic schools are outperforming public schools. And certainly, if you do it on any kind of assessment that is, they're doing a better job, an even better job considering that they spend far less per pupil than the public schools. I came to that conclusion partly as a result of doing research. But the reason I did some of the research and looked into the data was because it just occurred to me as I walked around my own neighborhood that there is a whole other school system there that almost no one in the mainstream media and even among the journals that I usually write for, was really writing about. As I became disillusioned with certain aspects of the public school system it just naturally occurred to me, well, lets take a look at this other system and see what I can learn and what conclusions we can draw about why the public schools aren't doing as well.

Louis Giovino: What did you discover specifically about Catholic schools?

Sol Stern: What amazed me was what you could do with very little money if you had the dedication, the sense of mission, if you had the structure...if you had the right to create a real sense of order in the school and hold students accountable for their behavior, and instill some very basic ideas, which we have lost in public schools—what is good character for young people growing up, what's acceptable and not acceptable.

Louis Giovino: What could you see in Catholic schools that could be adopted by public schools?

Sol Stern: [First] the absence of the kind of crippling work rules that now pervade the public school system. Second, the Catholic schools principals have a tremendous amount of autonomy. And the third most important—kids can't learn if there's no order, if there are no clear rules about what's permissible and not permissible in a school environment

Louis Giovino: Turning to the issue of vouchers. Vouchers and tuition tax credits, of the two, which one would you support?

Sol Stern: I would say whichever gets the job done. I don't have any ideological preference. I think tuition tax credits now in Florida are working real well, on the other hand, vouchers are working pretty well in Milwaukee. In my view it is a civil right, and if that can be done by giving the parent after the fact the amount of money that covers either all or part of the tuition in any private or parochial school through the tax system, that's fine. If it's done directly through a voucher, that's fine. As long as kids are getting out and you are creating a dynamic of competition. We can get to that, but that's the other issue of why I favor vouchers, it's not just for the kids getting out of a terrible situation, but it's also the effect on the public school system itself.

Louis Giovino: Now from your experience dealing with all this, have you seen anything specifically anti-Catholic from the unions?

Sol Stern: Of course. Absolutely. I say that in the book. Look, we know historically that the very development of the current public school system starting in the mid-nineteenth century was aimed against the hated Catholic Church and the new immigrants. Horace Mann, who is credited with developing the very idea of the common school, said it openly. So did the person who is credited for creating the New York City public school system at the turn of the century, Professor Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia. He represented a group of elite Protestant political leaders in New York that wanted to make sure that the public schools had one clear system for educating the immigrating kids in the values of a secular society.

Louis Giovino: We know historically there has been prejudice against Catholics. Do you have any examples today?

Sol Stern: I get comments like this all the time. Look, I live on the Upper West Side and for me coming out for vouchers was an act of betrayal for many, many so-called progressives. One of the reasons that they were very hostile about this issue was this idea that vouchers would undermine the public school system. They were very committed, devoted to the public school system. I have no problem with that. But clearly, in comments that were made to me, there was also this suspicion and hostility to the Catholic school sector, to the values that are taught in the Catholic schools, on all of the social issues. These are people, liberals, on issues such as abortion and gay rights and multiculturalism. They view the Catholic schools as a kind of bastion of regressive social policies. I think they are wrong. I understand that they have their positions, the liberal positions on these social issues. But they're just wrong to want to deny the kids the right to a decent education because of their hostility to the Catholic Church on all these other questions.

Louis Giovino: Within the Christian community, especially the Evangelical Protestants, first they were against vouchers and now they are for them. Do have any comments on that?

Sol Stern: I think it's a phenomenon of disenchantment with the public school system and they realize that the public schools have, in their view—and to some extent I agree with them—have gone off the deep end in terms of some of the values we have just talked about. You can hardly mention God in the public schools, but of course you could have a curriculum that is quite friendly to gay rights and gay liberation. So the Protestants, the evangelicals as you referred to them, are also sensing that need for exit, to be able to basically vote with their feet, their kid's feet. To be able to say, "Look, this is not the kind of character training that I want for my child, and I want the right to have my child allowed into an educational institution which meets my needs as a parent for development of his or her character." And so, there is some

support there, you are right, for the idea of vouchers.

Louis Giovino: What do you think about the prospect of Jews getting on board with vouchers?

Sol Stern: You do now have the Orthodox Jewish community supporting vouchers or tax credits of some kind because, of course, they see an advantage for them and they run their own school systems. For the rest of the Jewish community, both religious and secular, for those who are affiliated even with conservative or reform, and those who are non-affiliated and not really religious Jews, there is, again, a traditional fear on the church and state issue. Jews define their assimilation and integration and acceptances as Americans in terms of the model of complete separation of church and state—of the whole idea of religion being a very private matter. And historically, that's been their position and one of the reasons why none of the major Jewish organizations support vouchers.

Louis Giovino: You see the irony that the same people who want to sanitize religion from the public square are the same people who are against school choice. Can you comment on that? Is there anti-Catholicism behind that?

Sol Stern: Yes. Again, this is a complicated question. I think there are people who have legitimate questions about vouchers and they are worthy of debate. So, you have to distinguish. On the other hand there are people...that are just hostile to the idea of religion absolutely. They see this as a way of strengthening what they regard as a kind of pernicious influence of religious institutions over the minds of kids. And so it's hostility, and in some cases bigotry against religion and particularly Catholic religion. They don't want kids under the influence of the local parish. They much prefer them under the influence of the local ACLU or the local gay rights movement which clearly these institutions have a kind of entrée in the public schools and many of their values.