

HOUSE PASSES VOUCHER PLAN FOR D.C. BUT NOT WITHOUT SHENANIGANS

On September 5, by a narrow margin, 205-203, the House of Representatives passed legislation that permits vouchers for poor District of Columbia students; four Democrats joined 201 Republicans in approving the bill. Then the shenanigans began.

Angry at losing, the losers brought the issue back for another vote on September 9. They lost again, though this time the margin was even closer: the vote was 209-208.

After the first vote, we let loose with the following comments to the media:

“This is a significant victory for those who truly seek to champion the interests of the poor. The social science evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that nothing allows the children of the poor to succeed more than having access to private and parochial schools. This is exactly what voucher plans provide, and nowhere are they more needed than in D.C. After all, D.C. has long spent more money per pupil, with less bang for the buck, than any state in the union. It’s time for a change.

“The professed allies of the poor—teachers’ unions and many prominent African American leaders—have done more to retard progress in the black community than any organized effort of bigots. By constantly seeking to deny school choice to those most in need of it, they have made upward mobility extremely difficult. Their reliance on affirmative action as an engine of progress is similarly tainted: affirmative action can only help quicken the pace of progress for those who already possess an adequate education.

“In addition to those wedded to government programs, there is another segment of the population that stands in the way of progress for the poor: civil libertarians and church-and-state activists. If these people were given the choice of seeing indigent kids graduate as illiterates from a public school, or seeing them graduate with honors from a Catholic school, they would choose the former. Indeed, it wouldn't even be a tough decision, so strong is their animus against all things Catholic.

“We look forward to the Senate acting as courageously as the House.”

When the Senate votes, it will be interesting to see who flip-flops this time around. For example, Senator Mary Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat, previously said she would support vouchers for D.C. But recently she reversed herself. Ditto for Pennsylvania Republican Senator Arlen Specter: he went from being pro-choice on vouchers to anti-choice.

Flipping the other way is California Democrat Diane Feinstein. Long an opponent of school vouchers, Feinstein has had a change of heart and is now on board as a champion of school choice. Also switching from anti-choice to pro-choice is D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams. Both Feinstein and Williams have caught a lot of flack from their “friends” for doing so.

What's troubling about Landrieu and Specter is that public schools are not good enough for their own kids: Landrieu sends her children to one of the most expensive private schools in Georgetown and Specter sent all his kids to private schools.

Landrieu and Specter are not alone. A recent study by the Heritage Foundation revealed that 42 percent of the members of Congress who are parents have sent at least one of their children to a private school. In the general population, only 10 percent of students attend a private school. Many of the same members of Congress who think public schools aren't good

enough for their kids have no problem denying school choice to the poor.

Indeed, as the Heritage study found, "In the past three years, every piece of parental choice legislation would have passed if those who exercised choice in their own families had voted with supporters of school choice."

The old canard that vouchers drain money from the public schools was recently blown to bits by economist Milton Friedman. Friedman said that D.C. presently spends more than \$11,000 per year per student in public school. The D.C. voucher plan calls for a maximum of \$7,500. Therefore, he argues, "For every voucher student who leaves the public school for a private school, the system would gain more than \$3,500. Far from taking money away from public schools, vouchers increase the funds available per remaining student."

Moreover, a recent study by the Manhattan Institute shows that where vouchers are implemented, it has the effect of improving public schools; they respond positively to competition.

But none of this is enough to satisfy those opponents of vouchers who are motivated by anti-Catholicism. In the pages of the *Washington Post*, Marc Fisher wrote of the D.C. vote, "What we have here is a charity program in which the American taxpayer hands over millions of dollars to the same wealthy institution that has hundreds of millions to pay to victims of sexual abuse by wayward clergymen."

League policy analyst Joseph De Feo answered with a letter to the editor calling this a "potshot against the Catholic Church" that is "entirely gratuitous and mean-spirited." "Name-calling and cheap shots," De Feo concluded, "are the tactics of someone who won't bother to formulate a rational argument."