

MOMENTUM BUILDING FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

The 2000-2001 academic year is now underway and never before has the case for school choice been stronger. Survey after survey concludes that vouchers work and no group benefits from school choice more than poor non-whites. The numbers don't lie and that is one reason why prominent educators who previously resisted the idea of school vouchers are now coming on board.

Researchers at Harvard recently completed a two-year study on privately funded school choice programs in Washington, D.C., New York City and Dayton, Ohio. The big winners were black youngsters: they registered "moderately large" improvement in their math and reading scores.

With results like this, it is no wonder that non-whites are lining up in support of vouchers. A Gallup poll recently showed that nationwide seven in ten non-whites support vouchers. In New York City, the figures are even higher: a Hunter College survey disclosed that 87% of Hispanics, 86% of Asians and 83% of African Americans favor school choice.

So who's opposed to vouchers? White people, the teachers' unions and the Democratic Party. Whites send their kids to mostly satisfactory public schools and resist tampering with the system. The teachers' unions are concerned with maintaining their near-monopoly on the system. And the Democrats receive so much from the teachers' unions that they dare not cross them.

The hypocrisy runs deeper on this issue than perhaps any other. For example, champions of the poor like Bill Clinton, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Ted Kennedy and Al Gore all send, or sent, their kids to private schools. Yet they vigorous

oppose school choice. Indeed, in a survey conducted by the Heritage Foundation, no one congressman in the United States sends his kids to public school in the District of Columbia.

But times are changing. A new group has formed, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, which is tackling this issue head-on. And Clinton's former secretary of labor, Robert B. Reich, is come over to the pro-school choice side. Reich, now a professor at Brandeis, has looked at the data and concluded, "The evidence is in: Vouchers work."

Reich is advocating a novel program based on "progressive vouchers," one that would give money on a sliding scale, depending on income: those who earn the least would get the most generous voucher support while those who earn the most would benefit the least.

None of this is to say that vouchers are a sure thing. But it is getting harder to make the case for maintaining the status quo.