

NO SUBSTITUTE FOR VOUCHERS

Rick Hinshaw

The upheaval over New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's attack on charter schools highlights the urgent need for more alternatives to failing public schools in our inner cities and other areas of poverty; for greater parental choice in determining the best schools for their children; and—in order to both empower parents and broaden their alternatives—for fairer, less politically volatile methods of allocating educational resources.

What the current situation cries out for is an educational voucher system.

For years parents looking for alternatives to failing inner city public schools turned to Catholic schools to provide their children with the rigorous academic standards, discipline, core values, and parental involvement essential to a quality education. But because they were denied access to public funds to educate their children, many such parents—despite the fact that per-pupil expenditures to educate a child in Catholic schools are well below those of public schools—were simply unable to afford Catholic school tuition. So many inner city children remained trapped in failing public schools, while many high-performing Catholic schools have been forced to close.

Over the last two decades, charter schools have stepped into the breach, offering, according to noted New York writer Seth Lipsky, “a compromise effort to save public schools” through modest reforms —primarily freeing these schools from the stranglehold of the teachers' unions. In doing so, charters have clearly followed the successful Catholic school model, from academics and parental involvement to discipline and values—right down to the importance of school uniforms.

Obviously missing is the spiritual component, which has allowed charter schools to sidestep the bogus “church-state” issue used—by anti-Catholic bigots, yes, but more cynically by the teachers’ unions that have exploited such bigotry to maintain their monopoly on educational tax dollars.

We saw this again just weeks ago in New York State, when the state legislature—“despite explicit support from the vast majority of the state’s elected officials,” according to Cardinal Timothy Dolan—omitted from the state budget an Education Investment Tax Credit opposed by the public school teachers’ unions. This proposal would have allowed tax credits for donations to public schools as well as to scholarship programs for private or parochial schools. “Once again, Catholic school kids get kicked to the curb,” said Dolan—despite the fact that Catholic schools save New York taxpayers \$9 billion a year.

As de Blasio has now made clear, however, charter school parents are always one election—or one large teachers’ union campaign contribution—away from having their children’s high-performing schools ripped out from under them. So charters too, like Catholic, private and other parochial schools, need a more stable system for allocating public funds than one that places their children’s education at the mercy of shifting political winds and opportunistic politicians.

Again, Seth Lipsky: “A true voucher system would give parents, who are the customers of the school system, far greater choice,” allowing parents to direct the money being spent on their child’s education to the school of their choice—whether it be a charter or traditional public school, or a private or parochial school.

As Adam Emerson of the Fordham Institute for Advancing Educational Excellence reports, some 16 voucher programs nationally already direct state funds to families “to help offset the cost of a private (mostly religious) education.”

And Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) recently proposed a federal educational voucher program. But most of these voucher plans are severely restricted—by income levels, locations, or limitations of allocated funds. As such their impact, while positive, has been very limited. Ideally, the state would determine the total amount of public funds to be spent per student, and issue a voucher to every parent to direct that money for their child to the school of their choice.

Of course, charter school leaders might be resistant to the idea, as the current system, whereby they have access to public funds, gives them a decided advantage over private and parochial schools. But given the long waiting lists for charter schools virtually anywhere they exist—and the limits on their number imposed under current funding systems—a true, comprehensive voucher program, by allocating tax dollars in direct proportion to the demand for each type of school, would free up money for expansion of charter schools, private or parochial schools—or traditional public schools, if that's where the increased parental demand was.

It would also engender a competition for the education dollar that could only stimulate the pursuit of excellence in all types of schools, where any school closures would result from level of performance, not, as is the case today, from political favoritism, union strong-arming, and religious discrimination.

And a comprehensive voucher program would also secure the rights of parents who want spiritual formation to be an integral part of their children's education —“a freedom,” Emerson notes, “guaranteed by federal and state courts alike.”

“It's time,” writes Lipsky, who is Jewish, “to start addressing the legal legacy of the kind of bigotry that was turned on Catholic education in the 19th century.” It is “time to make it easier for religious schools to help educate our children.”

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