

VOUCHER FOES GETTING EDGY

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to settle the voucher issue has made several foes of school choice quite edgy.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) "expressed disappointment" that the high court would even give the issue a hearing. Referring to the Cleveland voucher program, the ADL said with alarm, "The vast majority of students that receive government-funded vouchers under this program attend religious schools." We might add that Catholic schools are the school of choice for most parents. That's what happens when the poor are given choices—they opt for the best school. Just like rich people do.

Barry Lynn at Americans United for Separation of Church and State also get exercised. For Lynn, the whole issue comes down to government funding of religion. He fails to see (intentionally in our mind) that his real problem is with impoverished families who are making choices he dislikes. Ditto for the ACLU. But the organization that is literally experiencing apoplexy is People for the American Way. On the very same day that the U.S. Supreme Court said it had accepted the Cleveland voucher program for review, People for the American Way just happened to release a study on why the program is a failure.

William Donohue immediately read the report, seized on its shortcomings, and issued the following news release on the subject:

"The report by People for the American Way, 'Empty Promises: A Closer Look at the Cleveland Voucher Program,' is twice flawed: it distorts the data and is ideologically driven. Indeed, the latter explains the former.

"To be specific, the report makes the astounding claim that, 'studies fail to demonstrate significant educational

improvement for students who transfer to voucher schools.’ This conclusion is not only contrary to the assessment rendered by virtually every scholar who has examined the data on school choice (in Cleveland, Milwaukee and other cities), it distorts the work of Kim Metcalf of the Indiana Center for Evaluation at Indiana University; professor Metcalf is cited in the endnotes as the author responsible for this conclusion.

“Speaking of the results of the Cleveland voucher program, Metcalf has said that ‘the results [after two years] indicate that scholarship students in existing private schools had significantly higher test scores than public school students in language (45.0 versus 40.0) and science (40.0 versus 36.0).’ He added that while on other scores there was no significant difference, it was fair to conclude that ‘The scholarship program effectively serves the population of families and children for which it was intended and developed’ (namely those in the low-income bracket).

“But what is really bothering People for the American Way is the fact that most of the families in the Cleveland voucher program have opted for Catholic schools. The report admits this saying that these programs ‘threaten students’ religious liberty and violate the separation of church and state.’ Nonsense to be sure, but revealing nonetheless: the driving force behind the report is the desire to deny the poor a Catholic education. Sadly, this is consistent with the group’s founding goals.”

Whichever way the high court rules, it will no doubt provoke a strong reaction among activists of all stripes. There is an awful lot at stake for everyone.