

Obama, Dems wrong to kill school vouchers

by Roland_S_Martin

When President Barack Obama signed the \$410 billion omnibus spending bill, there were shouts of joy from both sides, as Republicans and Democrats got their cherished earmarks. Yet tucked into that bill was an amendment pushed by the president's former Senate colleague Dick Durbin, D-Ill., who used his influence to essentially kill the District of Columbia's school vouchers program.

Oh, sure, it will be portrayed that the Democrats aren't killing the program, but the initiative calls for no new students to be allowed entry unless approved by Congress and the Council of the District of Columbia. And considering that the teachers union has a death grip on both Democratic-controlled institutions, you can forget about that happening.

Democrats say they believe in school choice, but they don't fully accept the gamut of choices. They happily tout charter schools, also opposed by the national teachers unions, but stop at vouchers. Why? Because Republicans consistently have advocated for vouchers and Democrats have convinced themselves that vouchers somehow will destroy the public school infrastructure.

Now, some believe the Obama administration is sending mixed signals, because Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said he doesn't want to see kids thrown out of Washington schools who are already in the existing voucher program. Fine. But the reality is that after this year, no new kids will be allowed to enroll in the program, and that, folks, is killing the program.

Obama and his party never have been fans of vouchers. Why? They contend that vouchers hurt the public school system. Vouchers allow parents who can't afford private schools to remove their children from public schools so their children can get better educations. Well, isn't that what the president and those in his party do themselves by sending their children to private schools? Only they don't need the government's help.

The standard fallback position of Democrats and the Obama administration is that the Washington program only helps 1,700 children a year and that those who don't qualify are stuck in a sorry system. Also, they say, the children are largely poor and minorities. They contend that because every student can't be helped by vouchers, none should be helped.

So parents and children are supposed to sit tight and wait on the promised reform to trickle down from Washington to the local school systems and then all will be well? To me, that's sort of like saying that historically, African-Americans have high rates of diabetes and hypertension, so instead of launching a program to save some from developing these conditions, let's wait for a comprehensive plan under which all can be saved at one time.

Sorry, folks. I believe you save as many as you can now and continue to save the rest later. This shouldn't be an either/or proposition; it should be an and/both situation.

The other fundamental problem here is that we have a bunch of politicians deciding what's best for education over the objections of actual educators! For instance, Democrats have had high praise for the superintendent of schools in Washington, Michelle Rhee. Just one problem: She supports vouchers.

"I don't think vouchers are going to solve all the ills of public education, but parents who are zoned to schools that are failing kids should have options to do better by their kids," Rhee told The New York Times.

So if Rhee backs them, why not give her the vote of confidence to continue the program while she tries to fix the ailing school system?

The education reform outlined by President Obama Tuesday is necessary. But we are a long way from seeing the kind of systemic changes that will fix our public schools. His plan goes far on personal and parental responsibility yet relies on states to enact their own measures of change, and with 50 different state school plans, we know that is a disaster waiting to happen.

I would have more confidence if President Obama and members of Congress truly walked the walk and sent their kids to public schools. If they have so much faith in them turning around with reform, they should entrust their own children to public education. That's the kind of confidence our system needs. If it's good enough for yours, then surely it's good enough for mine.

But preaching to the rest of us about the virtues of a public education and then sending your own children to private schools and denying the use of vouchers so others can do the same is hypocritical.

I know the value of a public education and went to such institutions for elementary school, middle school, high school and college. Yet looking at the sorry state public schools are in now, maybe seeing kids leave in droves via vouchers will force school administrators and teachers to stop thinking they have all the answers and allow for innovation and full accountability, from the classroom to the boardroom.

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