

William A. Galston and Diane Ravitch

Scholarships for Inner-City School Kids

While experts debate whether suburban schools have escaped what "Nation at Risk," a 1983 report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, called the rising tide of mediocrity, few deny that severe problems continue in large urban public school districts. The poor, mainly minority children in these districts, are far likelier to exhibit low levels of achievement and to drop out of school before graduation than are their peers from other areas.

The two of us approach these longstanding problems from different experiences in Democratic and Republican administrations, but our views converge on a number of policy responses. We believe strongly not just in national education goals but in common content standards for learning and in tests keyed to these standards. We applaud recent moves in this direction by New York city and state officials. We believe that these tests should have consequences—for promotion, high school graduation and even for admission to post-secondary institutions. We endorse the efforts that many states and localities have made to construct new public alternatives to inefficient centralized school bureaucracies.

A number of jurisdictions have experimented with new contracting and management arrangements. Twenty-five states have passed charter school laws, which allow new or existing public schools to function as independent units, free of most regulations. With President Clinton's strong leadership, federal support for charter school startups has risen substantially during the past four years.

But while all these efforts are moving in the right direction, we have concluded that for the poorest children—those most at risk of failure—even stronger measures have to be tried. State legislatures in Wisconsin and Ohio have enacted laws to permit poor children in Milwaukee and Cleveland to receive means-tested scholarships for nonpublic schools. These efforts should be expanded into a national demonstration program involving poor children in no fewer than 10 hard-pressed urban school districts for a period of no less than five years, with carefully designed monitoring and evaluation plans. We cannot afford to write off another generation of urban schoolchildren. To respond to this national emergency, every reasonable approach must be tried—without delay.

It is true that the children in these school districts labor under social and economic handicaps; they are more likely to be poor, to come from single-parent households and to live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty. The poorer the students, the less likely they are to have taken the academic courses that prepare for higher education and the more likely to develop problems of discipline and absenteeism.

But these difficulties are no excuse for what amounts to organizational breakdown in many big-city school districts. These bureaucratic systems are legendary for inadequate planning, excessive numbers of nonteaching staff and mismanagement of facilities and supplies. All too often, they have become job programs for adults at the expense of the children they are supposed to serve.

For the most part these systems, designed nearly a century ago to function like factories and to prepare students for the industrial era, are hopelessly backward in an age of high technology and high performance. Because these obsolete systems are defended by a phalanx of entrenched interests, new approaches will be needed to change incentives and redistribute power.

Here's how our plan would work:

To qualify for these scholarships, students would have to be currently enrolled in public schools and eligible for the federal

free lunch program. The scholarship itself would equal the average per-pupil expenditure of the public school district, plus whatever federal funds (Title I or special education) the student would ordinarily be entitled to receive.

To ensure basic levels of quality, only state-recognized or accredited schools would be eligible to receive students with these scholarships. To ensure fairness, only schools complying with the 1964 Civil Rights Act would be allowed to participate. And to ensure accountability, these schools would be required to administer annually the same achievement tests used by the public schools.

Many objections have been raised against means-tested scholarships. For some critics, the fact that these scholarships could be used at religious schools will raise constitutional issues. We wonder why this should be so when current federal student aid programs allow college students to spend their scholarships at religious institutions and when religious institutions are allowed to sponsor the HeadStart program and other social services.

Other critics have suggested that the proposal is a sham because the scholarship would not be large enough to allow poor families to send their children to upscale private schools. But that's not the point: there are many nonpublic schools with tuition and fees no higher than the average per-pupil cost of public schools, and in some cases considerably lower. Our proposal would substantially expand the choices available to low-income families.

Others doubt that the feasible alternatives to public schools can do a better job of educating low-income students. Maybe not. But we note the mounting evidence that many Catholic schools in particular provide the structure, discipline and nurturing climate that enables disadvantaged youngsters to stay in school, study a challenging academic curriculum, graduate and go on to

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college—not to mention developing the virtues needed to succeed later on as workers, parents and citizens.

Besides, in many lower-income urban areas, the traditional ideal of the “common school” is realized at least as well in Catholic schools as in the public schools; Catholic schools in the inner cities are typically not less, but rather more integrated across lines of race and ethnicity.

Another common objection is that while our program might begin with the poor, it wouldn't stop there; soon, middle-class families would be demanding scholarships as well. Perhaps so. But it is more than a little strange that many of these critics are strong proponents of traditional means-tested programs such as food stamps, which have not been transformed into universal subsidies or entitlements.

Or consider the Pell grant program, which has increased post-secondary educational opportunity and choice for poor students without expanding into a middle-class entitlement (and without harming public higher education). Besides, unlike the urban poor, suburban middle-class families are reasonably satisfied with their public schools. (In many cases, that's why they choose to live where they do.)

The fear is commonly expressed that while students whose families make use of their scholarships might be better off, the students “left behind” would be even worse off. The worry may be sincere, but its logic is obscure. Public officials will set the ceiling on the number of scholarships; not more than 5 percent to 10 percent of the poorest students will be eligible—hardly enough to undermine the leading role of the public schools or to draw away their best students.

And schools that find themselves losing students might respond to the challenge by upgrading their offerings. While there are as yet too few examples of competition to provide solid evidence, some preliminary studies suggest that increased competition does spur public schools to improve their performance.

It is often (and rightly) said that we don't know what we must know to implement means-tested scholarship programs. The only way to develop the evidence we need (for example, on whether competition undermines or enhances the performance of public schools and whether the achievement of poor students improves) is to allow a serious experiment to proceed, unhindered by the scorched-earth politics that has hindered innovation in so many American cities.

The bipartisan Low-Income School Choice Demonstration Act proposed in 1995 by Sens. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Dan Coats (R-Ind.) would be a good point of departure for congressional debate. It is time to set ideology and politics aside and put our children first.

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Give Choice a Chance

When William Galston, President Clinton's former domestic policy adviser, and Diane Ravitch, President Bush's Assistant Secretary of Education, join forces, it's time to sit up and take notice. They've joined to support federal funds for demonstration projects on school choice, including religious schools.

Writing in the Washington Post, Mr. Galston and Ms. Ravitch lambaste big-city school districts for too often becoming "job programs for adults at the expense of the children they are supposed to serve." They note Milwaukee and Cleveland have passed laws creating means-tested scholarships with which poor parents can send their children to any school of their choice. Evaluations of the five-year-old Milwaukee choice program show choice students do better and parents are more satisfied.

School choice is on the march and the power of teachers unions is starting to wane. Even Al Shanker, head of the American Federation of Teachers union, has said he could go along with choice programs targeted at the bottom 10% of students in urban schools. The National Education Association now advises its members to use the words "tuition vouchers" when attacking choice programs, because educational choice has become too appealing a term.

In the last election, teachers unions targeted several prominent school choice advocates for defeat, but from Arizona to Ohio they fell short in their efforts. "Where are the scalps on the union wall?" asks Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform. More and more, local school districts are deciding to risk the wrath of local unions and try to implement elements of choice. Consider these developments:

- The Lake Travis school district near Austin, Texas, wants to solve its overcrowding problems by offering scholarships to attend local private schools. Students would receive \$3,000 stipends for tuition, which is substantially less than the \$4,700 the district now spends annually on each student.

A similar program is already under way in Houston, where Superintendent Rod Paige responded to overcrowding by contracting with a private school to accept 190 children. Texas Governor George W. Bush supports legislation to set up scholarship programs in San Antonio and other inner-city districts, and we hope he also backs the right of local districts to offer choice on their own.

- A school board in Chittendon, Vermont, is expanding that state's existing school choice program. Since 1869, Vermont has allowed students in towns without a public high school to use local education money to attend private schools. Starting in the 1960s it no longer permitted religious schools to participate. Now Chittendon's school board has approved the applications of 15 students to attend a local Catholic school.

The state's board of education has cut off funds for Chittendon, and the Institute for Justice, which is representing the board, says it is likely to be the first school choice case heard by the Supreme Court. Those who raise Constitutional objections to including religious schools never properly explain why college students are allowed to use their federal Pell grants at religious universities and why federal day-care and HeadStart funds can be spent at religious institutions.

- School choice efforts by Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler have been stymied in New Jersey's legislature, but he is now supporting efforts by the suburban Lincoln Park school district to provide scholarships to parents who are dissatisfied with the high school in nearby Boonton to which their children have been assigned. School board president Patrick English says that the Boonton high school is more than half filled with Lincoln Park students, but educators won't listen to the concerns of his board about low test scores, even though Lincoln Park

spends \$9,200 a year for each student it sends there. State Education Commissioner Leo Klagholz says he "must remain neutral" in the dispute, but wrote Mr. English that his idea "may be worth pursuing independently."

Local districts aren't the only pioneers in school choice. New York philanthropist Virginia Gilder has offered scholarships to every student at the Giffen Elementary School in Albany, the state capital. More than half of Giffen's third-graders read below state standards, and parents are lining up for the scholarships. Ohio Governor George Voinovich may support efforts to expand the Cleveland scholarship program to Youngstown and other cities. In Minnesota, Governor Arne Carlson wants to expand the state's existing tax credits for private schools and says he will veto the state budget if it isn't included. School choice efforts in Arizona and Pennsylvania, which failed narrowly last year, are now given a good chance to succeed with more friendly legislatures.

Clearly school choice has become a rallying point for parents and reform-minded teachers and educators seeking to give this country's children a globally competitive education. The unions have to decide whether to try to break the rally, or perhaps find a way to join the movement themselves.