



The outbreak of a 'Rasche' of common sense?

By Jim Waters

I cannot escape the irony that the same politician who killed a bill offering more and better educational options for all of Kentucky's 109,000 special-needs students also sponsored an amendment this year that legalized a charter school for a privileged few.

During last year's legislative session, parents of special-needs students took time to drive to Frankfort attend a House Education Committee meeting.

They went expecting help from legislators charged with improving our education system. They came away with nothing.

Parents watched stunned as the committee, chaired by Paducah Rep. Frank Rasche, fielded complaints from union lackeys who droned on about the need for labor protections for nonessential school personnel. Committee members complained about schoolchildren eating too many Twinkies and ignoring playground monkey bars.

The smokescreen would bring tears to most Kentuckians' eyes.

These worn issues serve as an oasis for lethargic lawmakers, a spider hole where they can lay up and ignore reality. Yet, Rasche sacrificed the valuable time of some committee members and parents, who expected the committee to at least give a hearing Special Needs Scholarship Bill a hearing.

But in the closing moments of this year's General Assembly session, Rasche and others crawled out of their lairs and amended legislation to allow 120 academically gifted students to attend the state's first and only charter school – the Gatton Academy of Math and Science at Western Kentucky University.

You make the call: If we can spend \$2.8 million on this academy so that its 120 students can attend an innovative school that uniquely fits their needs, shouldn't parents of the 668,217 other students in Kentucky's 1,238 public schools have similar opportunities for their children? At the least, shouldn't the state's special-needs students get similar help?

To ignore that logic represents the worst form of discrimination.

Granted, the Gatton Academy attracts exceptionally gifted and mature young people. The academy's students average an ACT math composite score of 29.14, some eight points higher than the average. Students live away from home. They maintain their own schedules. Mom isn't there, telling them to turn off the TV and do their homework.

"These are exceptionally gifted students who go beyond the caliber of even advanced-placement work," said Corey Alderdice, the academy's assistant director for admissions and public relations. "Challenging students is very much a part of this program. It's a rigorous curriculum."

Alderdice says the academy “works with public-school districts to help meet the needs of students.”

And *that* is what school choice is all about: Meeting the needs of students by enhancing, not destroying, public education.

The House voted 94-0 and the Senate voted 35-0 to authorize the Gatton academy. In doing so, they supported the concept of constructing a way for parents to have choices for their children.

You don’t need to be a rocket scientist – or Gatton Academy enrollee – to understand this: Unanimous approval indicates that more and more lawmakers have started to frown on resistance to advancing school choice displayed by Rasche and his labor pals in the state teachers unions, who claim competition would harm public education.

The votes indicate growing faith in parents, who know better than bureaucrats, central offices or politicians, which schools best meet their children’s educational needs.

Gatton’s students need the rigorous challenges offered by the academy. Many of Kentucky’s other “special-needs” students require services to help them overcome learning disabilities and live a successful life.

If Rasche really has seen the light and found school-choice salvation, he and his committee will quit obstructing legislation that offers the same kind of opportunities to parents of these children.

Considering the committee’s longtime kowtowing to the teachers unions and other “educrats,” such a change would be miraculous – and confirmation that genuine conversions have taken place.

Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. You can reach him at jwaters@bipps.org. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.