



Not all fiddling requires a Stradivarius

By Jim Waters

The tale of emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burned seems like a historical stretch. The fiddle wasn't invented until the 16th century.

But not all fiddling requires a Stradivarius, and good ideas can go up in flames when state legislators assume the role of emperor.

For example, take the fiddling done by Kentucky's political leadership and educational bureaucracy.

While policymakers in other states listen and respond to demands for change in education - and more options for children - Kentucky's politicians fiddle around while parents do a slow burn.

It's much more politically convenient to talk about pouring more money into Kentucky's wasteful public-education system. It seems the "emperors" would rather spend more than the 49 percent of the state budget already used for K-12 than to enact policies that might upset powerful politicians, special-interest groups or labor unions.

That's a woeful tune played by tone-deaf leaders with a busted instrument.

Georgia's governor signed a bill on May 18 creating scholarships for families of special-needs children. In contrast, Kentucky's governor continues to ignore the issue of school choice, even though he cast a critical vote as a U.S. representative to bring school choice to Washington, D.C.

That's fiddling, and no one knows better than parents of special-needs children. I've heard from them in forums, during phone conversations and in e-mails during the past year. I see their frustration and despair. Parents forced to swim through a sea of red tape in an effort to get a better education for a student already behind in the count in life get real frustrated.

Can you blame them when they see others taking action?

Georgia's bill offers scholarships to parents who want to place children in another school – public or private. Scholarships cover a private school's entire tuition or the amount used to pay for the child's education in the assigned public district, the lesser of the two.

Similar bills have become law in other states such as Florida, where the McKay Scholarship Program, started in 1999, helps provide a better education – and likely a better life – for nearly 20,000 special-needs children.

In Kentucky? A bill just like Florida's would have provided a scholarship for Kentucky's 109,000 special-needs children. But it died in the most-occupied graveyard in Frankfort - a House committee. Emperor Frank Rasche, House Education Committee chair, wouldn't even allow discussion on the bill.

Anyone hear a foul note being struck?

Going on seven years now. Florida provides its neediest students a chance for a better life. Meanwhile Frank – and

Frankfort – continue to fiddle.

The establishment would have you think it's not that big of a deal and that parents of special-needs children generally remain happy with the state of education for their children.

Don't believe it.

A recent broadcast of "Kentucky Tonight" focused on the issue of special-needs scholarships. Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, wrote this in an e-mail read by the show's host, Bill Goodman: "Anyone who suggests that public schools are meeting their responsibility in this area is delusional."

And why do bureaucrats and teacher-union labor bosses claim parents are so satisfied, yet these same emperors vigorously oppose allowing more choices for them? If parents remain satisfied, then most would not seek a change. The logic fizzles. End of tune.

Union representatives – who also participated on that "Kentucky Tonight" show – claimed that Kentucky's private schools cannot handle special-needs students. If that were true, surely parents would recognize it. So why not let *them* decide the best school for their children?

Kentucky Department of Education officials indicate they don't believe a lot of parents really want to move their children to a different school. They're probably right.

Most won't. Only about 4 percent of Florida's special-needs students actually take advantage of the McKay Scholarship program. Significant flight from public schools hasn't happened in Florida or in any of the other states that currently offer special-needs scholarships. No evidence exists that a mass exodus would occur if Kentucky offers special-needs scholarships.

But for those Kentucky parents who desperately need the kind of help that a one-size-fits-all public education monopoly cannot provide their special-needs child, Kentucky's governor, legislators and education bureaucracy should quit fiddling around.

– *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.*