



‘Mental bailout’ costly for needy children

By Jim Waters

It’s no surprise that powerful teacher unions succeeded in using the \$410 billion federal spending bill to kill a voucher program that allows 1,700 students from low-income homes in Washington, D.C., to attend private schools through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Political power – not students’ educational needs – remains the top priority of labor bosses. These “anti-school choice” unions desperately want to squelch D.C. Opportunity before a federal evaluation of it comes out in June.

I think they fear the study might debunk their favorite “talking points” – code for “propaganda,” which are:

- Voucher programs create an uneven playing field in education.
- Voucher programs harm public schools.

A growing body of evidence shows that voucher programs have a positive impact on the recipients and on school systems.

“Every empirical study ever conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Maine and Vermont finds that voucher programs in those places improved public schools,” said Greg Forster, a senior fellow at the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

None of the 17 studies Forster reviewed showed that vouchers harm public schools.

In 2004, Congress created D.C. Opportunity. It operates like 23 similar school-choice programs that now exist in 14 states and serve more than 160,000 students.

Giving parents the option of using vouchers to send their children to a private school would help Kentucky tremendously, and it would work – just as it does in D.C. and elsewhere. A Bluegrass Institute school-choice survey in 2007 found that 79 percent of Kentuckians who responded believe parents should have more choice in determining where their children attend school. More than 64 percent supported vouchers.

This comes as no surprise. Most clear-thinking Kentuckians understand that competition drives down costs and improves quality. Competition in education would work the same way. Pubic schools that lost students because of vouchers would need to improve or go out of business.

Increasingly, research shows that school choice plans save money and improve the quality of education – even for those students “left behind” in failing public schools. A rising tide really does lift all boats.

It lifted President Barack Obama’s boat. Obama attended Hawaii’s private Punahou School as a youngster. His daughters attend Sidwell Friends School in the Capitol, where two of their fellow students could get the boot if they can no longer benefit from D.C. Opportunity vouchers.

Obama is now signaling that he won’t allow the D.C. Opportunity program to die. He’s also indicating his support for more charter schools and merit pay for teachers – two positions unions fear because such policies would bring a level of accountability that public education never had and union bosses don’t want.

Following through on these proposals would show the president gets it: Education is about students – not unions, money or the system.

If the D.C. Opportunity voucher program shuts down, “change you can believe in” would hit Deborah Parker right square in the eye. Her daughters are students at Sidwell and would have to return to public schools. Parker told the Washington Post that the “mere thought of returning to public schools frightens me.”

A favorite argument of school-choice naysayers is that voucher programs cost too much. However, D.C. Opportunity gets a paltry \$14 million. Compare that with various “bailout” spending bills that give \$650 million to fund digital-TV vouchers, \$300 million to build golf carts and hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund tattoo removals.

Giving priority to removing tattoos before backing quality education – and a chance for a future for a student – represents a “mental bailout” and a grade of “F” for “Fatheads” in Congress.

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