



Hell-bent against school choice

By Jim Waters

Call me naïve.

When I started promoting “school choice” – emancipating parents to choose which school children attend with at least some public money to follow – I knew opposition awaited me.

But I thought critics would engage in debate based on facts and sound reasoning.

I am right about school choice. I am wrong about that debate.

Don’t misunderstand. Credible opponents of school choice exist. They honestly believe that allowing parents to choose schools best for their children can harm public education, even though the evidence suggests otherwise. These opponents don’t just try to protect some hackneyed agenda, teacher-labor unions or a deteriorating education system.

But the opposition includes so many visceral antagonists – primarily bureaucrats and anti-choice politicians – who for myriad illogical reasons have become entrenched against changing a public-education system that props up incompetent schools and beats down long-oppressed taxpayers.

An example: Colorado Rep. Mike Merrifield, recently chairman of that state Legislature’s education committee until he e-mailed a state senator that “there must be a special place in hell” for school-choice supporters.

School-choice supporters in Colorado have long known Merrifield subtly worked at undermining their efforts. However, unable to contain himself any longer or credibly argue with the success of Colorado’s charter schools, Merrifield resorted to a mean-spirited attack.

“There must be a special place in hell for these Privatizers, Charterizers and Voucherizers,” he wrote. “They deserve it!”

“They” are 52,000 Colorado children who attended charter schools last year, their parents and fellow lawmakers who voted to free parents from the ties to public schools that bind their children. It’s also includes tens of thousands of children who attend the nation’s 4,000 charter schools.

Missing from Merrifield’s e-mail is any acknowledgement that Colorado’s charter-school students generally made greater gains than students in conventional public schools in reading, writing and science last year.

He also apparently believes a “special place in hell” exists for the parents of the 17,000 learning-disabled children in Florida who receive scholarships to send children to non-public schools that provide a quality education and better services to meet their individual and unique needs.

Make no mistake that some in Kentucky avoid Merrifield’s hateful terms but nevertheless possess the same intolerance for providing the public-education monopoly with healthy competition.

So far, Kentucky's school-choice opponents – led by the Kentucky Education Association and those who carry that teachers-union's political water in the Legislature – have subtly hindered every effort to bring school choice to the commonwealth. That approach usually takes the form of misstatements intended to get people to dismiss the idea.

An example: House Speaker Jody Richards recently told Lexington radio talk show host Jack Pattie: "I'm not for school choice. I think that would destroy the system, personally." Such a notion remains popular with anti-choice politicians.

But parents know better.

- Forty-six states – including the seven states bordering Kentucky – have some form of statewide, parent-empowering school-choice law. None of their education systems have disintegrated.
- Plenty of evidence suggests that students – especially those from low-income homes where parents can't afford to move or pay private-school tuition – benefit from school choice.
- The Center for Education Reform reported that 30 percent of Massachusetts charter schools performed significantly better on recent tests than their traditional public-school counterparts in the same district.
- Last year, 88 percent of Georgia's charter schools – compared with 79 percent of traditional public schools – showed Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) necessary to meet federal No Child Left Behind requirements. This is especially significant considering the Peach State's charter schools have much-larger proportions of students who qualify for free-and-reduced cost lunches than the state's traditional schools.

Meanwhile, Merrifield protested the publication of his e-mail, calling it private communication. (Did he get that idea in an e-mail from someone in the Fletcher administration?) But Colorado's parents deserve to know where education leaders really stand concerning the right to school choice.

So I predict that sooner or later, Kentucky parents also will find out what their leaders really believe about the possibility of educational emancipation when it comes to their children.

What a heavenly thought.

– *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.*