



Williams: A case for vouchers

Tuesday, February 25, 2014

A fortnight ago, my column focused on how Philadelphia's schoolteachers have joined public-school teachers in cities such as Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, Columbus, New York and Washington in changing student scores on academic achievement tests. Teachers have held grade fixing parties, sometimes wearing rubber gloves to hide fingerprints. In some cases, poorly performing students were excused from taking exams to prevent them from dragging down averages. As a result of investigations, a number of schoolteachers and administrators have been suspended, fired or indicted by states attorneys general.

Most of these cheating scandals have occurred in predominantly black schools across the nation. At one level, it's easy to understand — but by no means condone — the motivation teachers have to cheat. Teachers have families to raise, mortgages, car payments and other financial obligations. Their pay, retention and promotions depend on how well their students perform on standardized tests.

Very often, teachers must deal with an impossible classroom atmosphere in which many, if not most, of the students are disorderly, disobedient and alien and hostile to the education process. Many students pose a significant safety threat. The latest statistics available, published by the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, in a report titled "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2012," tell us that nationwide from 2007 to 2008, about 145,100 public-school teachers were physically attacked by students, and another 276,700 were threatened with injury.

A report supported in part by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, titled "Reducing Suspension among Academically Disengaged Black Males," suggests a tolerance for disruptive students.

There are members of the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP and the National Urban League who attended school during the years I attended (1942-54).

During those days, no youngster would have even cursed a teacher, much less assaulted one. One has to wonder why black leaders accept behavior that never would have been tolerated by their parents and teachers. Back then, to use foul language or assault a teacher or any other adult would have resulted in some form of corporal punishment in school or at home or both. Today, such discipline would have a teacher or parent jailed. That, in turn, means there is little or no meaningful sanction against unruly or criminal behavior.

No one argues that yesteryear's students were angels. In Philadelphia, where I grew up, students who posed severe disciplinary problems were removed. Daniel Boone School was for unruly boys, and Carmen was for girls. Some people might respond: But what are we going to do with the students kicked out? Whether or not there are resources to help them is not the issue. The critical issue is whether they should be permitted to make education impossible for students who are capable of learning. It's a policy question similar to: What do you do when you have both drunken drivers and sober drivers on the road? The first order of business is to get the drunken drivers off the road. Whether there are resources available to help the drunks is, at best, a secondary issue.

There is little that the political and education establishment will do about the grossly fraudulent education received by many black youngsters, and more money is not the answer. For example, according to findings by Cato Institute's Andrew J. Coulson, Washington, D.C., spends \$29,409 per pupil. In terms of academic achievement, its students are nearly the nation's worst. The average tuition for a K-12 Catholic school is \$9,000, and for a nonsectarian private K-12 school, it is \$16,000. A voucher system would empower black parents to remove their children from high-cost and low-quality public schools and enroll them in lower-cost and higher-quality nonpublic schools.