

The Augusta Chronicle

Try competition

School choice is 'the civil rights issue of our time'

By **Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff**

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America has tried everything to improve its educational system, and has failed. Everything.

Except what works best.

We have thrown money at the problem, to no avail. Our education spending is among the highest in the world, but test scores still lag behind other industrialized nations. Says the University of Southern California: “The U.S. is the clear leader in total annual spending, but ranks ninth in science performance and 10th in math.”

Andrew J. Coulson, in a 2009 report for the Cato Institute in Washington, writes, “we have little to show for the nearly \$2 trillion spent on federal education programs since 1965. ... (F)ederal education spending per pupil has nearly tripled since 1970 in real, inflation-adjusted dollars – but achievement has barely budged. In fact, the only subject in which achievement at the end of high school has changed by more than 1 percent is science, and it has gotten worse. “Families facing tight budgets actually consider canceling a service that doesn’t benefit them,” Coulson writes, suggesting that perhaps spending on the status quo is not the answer.

We’ve also tried leveling the full weight and strength of the leviathan United States bureaucracy against the problem: The No Child Left Behind Act – this nation’s most sweeping education reform in several generations – has been an unprecedented reach of the federal government down into local schools. Yet, again, to little or no gain.

And perhaps, even, to our detriment: Arne Duncan, President Obama’s secretary of education, candidly noted that No Child Left Behind “inadvertently encourages states to lower” learning standards, in order to be in “compliance.” The law has “led to a dumbing down of standards, and it’s led to a narrowing of curriculum,” he told *The Hill* last year.

“After a decade on the books,” the Associated Press wrote earlier this year, “President George W. Bush’s most hyped domestic accomplishment has become a symbol to many of federal overreach and Congress’ inability to fix something that’s clearly flawed.”

So spending isn’t the answer. Neither is the bureaucracy.

Why hasn’t this country tried what it knows, better than any nation on Earth, works best?

Competition.

We firmly believe that school choice can improve educational performance in America. Paradoxically, it empowers both school and parent, to the benefit of the student.

True school choice would allow parents to shop for the best schools. That would put instant pressure on school officials to perform at a higher level. At the same time, most schools could, and should, be empowered to toss non-performing, non-complying, disruptive students out on their stumps. There can always be alternative schools for them. That would empower schools to set and enforce strict guidelines for entry – putting instant pressure on parents and students to perform at a higher level.

In addition, we believe – as presidential candidate Mitt Romney said this week – that school choice is actually “the civil rights issue of our time.”

People with money already have school choice. They get up and move away from poorly performing schools or districts, or simply enroll their children in private schools.

It’s the disadvantaged – many of them minorities – who are stuck in the schools the government provides and dictates they attend.

Oddly, it’s the teachers’ union-obeying Democratic Party that is standing in the way of school choice – the same Democratic Party that is blindly supported by so many.

We Googled the phrase “competition makes you better.” We instantly found numerous examples of sports figures saying it.

When is academia going to learn it?