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Good News for School Reform

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Several recent news reports are worth reviewing for the good news they bring about American K-12 school reform.

The first is the news out of Atlanta that eleven out of twelve accused Atlanta educators have been found guilty of school test fraud.

The original case was filed in 2013 against 35 Atlanta public school teachers and administrators, including the district's highly acclaimed superintendent, Beverly Hall. The group was accused of organizing cheating on the state's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests, used to objectively determine where students stand educationally. In 2009, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported a strange spike in tests scores, which led to a state investigation eventually uncovering the fraud. Investigators found an extensive web of cheating, with teachers, administrators, and principals holding "cheating parties" and otherwise colluding to ensure the Atlanta School District would look like it was doing a great job. They were all subsequently charged with racketeering and other major felonies.

On the basis of the fraudulent scores, Hall had become nationally famous, and many of the teachers and administrators had received promotions and/or bonuses.

Naturally, the civil rights establishment – always more concerned about black teachers' jobs than black kids' educations – circled the wagons around Hall and the other dirty "educators." But the crooked educators were prosecuted anyway.

Along the way, 21 of the 35 accused reached plea bargain agreements, and two (including the aforementioned Beverly Hall) died of natural causes. The remaining dozen finally faced trial about six months ago, and eleven of them have now been found guilty. They face prison time of up to 20 years each.

I for one hope they all do the maximum time. They didn't just cheat the taxpayers; they cheated their students out of whatever meager chance at a decent education the lousy local public school system offers.

Even better news is the report that the massive Republican gains in state legislatures last November is resulting in an explosion of school choice legislation. Focusing just upon bills that will enable more students to switch from the public schools (as opposed to charter schools, which are generally substantially independent of the local public school system but still part of it), 34 states have introduced new bills of various sorts – up from 29 a year ago.

Start with the simple idea of allowing tax deductions for parents paying their kids' tuition at private schools. Two states have introduced bills that would grant such credits or donations. These states are Arkansas and South Carolina.

Twenty-two states have introduced bills that would allow both individuals and businesses to deduct from their taxes part or all of the donations they make to nonprofits that give scholarships that enable students to attend private schools. Sixteen states have introduced legislation to allow education savings account programs, which put state money directly into accounts to enable some poor parents to cover the costs of private schools. Most excitingly, thirteen states have introduced bills to allow vouchers – that is, put state education money directly into the hands of parents to enable their kids to attend private schools.

How many of these measures pass and get signed into law remains to be seen, of course. Still, as one education policy analyst at the Cato Institute noted, “[i]t is looking like this year could beat 2011 in the number of states that expand or adopt new educational choice programs.” (Two thousand eleven was a record year for school choice, with 13 states adopting such programs.)

Texas looks like it is taking the lead in school choice. A recent article notes that Texas lawmakers are debating a crucial bill (SB 276) that would in effect voucherize the entire state. It would allow all Texas parents who want to switch their kids from public to private schools to get a voucher equal to 60% of the state average per pupil expenditure – which would be a yearly voucher of about \$5,200. (The remaining \$3,000 saved would then be returned to the state's treasury, rather than remain in the hands of the public school corrupt bureaucracy.)

The authors of the piece (Kent Grusendorf and Michael Barba) readily acknowledge that the bill faces a tough battle, even though Texas is fairly conservative. In part this is because in Texas, it is often unclear to voters exactly how the local school bureaucracy is funded. But an even bigger problem facing the legislation is that in Texas – as in so much of the country, to be honest – a significant portion of the primarily white suburban and rural districts are resistant to allowing vouchers.

The authors don't explain why, but I think the explanation is obvious.

The three biggest obstacles to vouchers are first, the teachers unions, who fear and loathe all efforts at reform as threatening their more mediocre members. Second and worse is the perverse continuing tendency of blacks and Hispanics to vote in Democrats who are more beholden to teachers' unions than to minority kids. Witness Obama, who got nearly unanimous black and overwhelming Hispanic support, and upon election, his first act was to end the small D.C. voucher program that was letting a few thousand primarily black kids attend the private schools

they desired, all the while he and his wife were picking the toniest private school for their own children.

But the worst problem of all is the complacent whites, who think that just because in the local schools their kids are getting decent grades and there is little violence, the public school system works. It doesn't. In fact, their own kids are getting a mediocre education, as shown by the international tests many of those kids take. The white parents should welcome the chance to seek out better schools. Their kids are facing competition not from the urban American minorities, but from the rising Asian and European countries, whose kids are routinely outperforming the complacent whites.

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