



When the Left Loved (School) Choice

Educational freedom wasn't always a partisan issue

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Aside from repeated promises about “free” college education (that are prohibitively expensive and would create perverse incentives), last night’s Democratic presidential debate contained very little talk of education, particularly K-12 education.

That’s much to the chagrin of most education policy wonks, but it’s for the best. Constitutionally, the federal government has little to no role in K-12 education nationwide, outside of civil rights. Moreover, there’s little evidence that federal involvement in the classroom has improved education.

One area the feds do have a role in K-12 education is in Washington, D.C., where Congress recently voted to reauthorize the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), which has significantly higher graduation rates and costs much less per pupil than the district schools.

Sadly, though the primary beneficiaries of the school voucher program are members of the Democrats’ base, elected Democrats mostly want to do away with it. President Clinton vetoed the OSP when it was first proposed, and President Obama has repeatedly left it out of his proposed budget.

The Democratic presidential frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, is not likely to be any more supportive than her predecessors — there is a reason, after all, that she scooped up early endorsements from the nation’s two largest teachers unions, which vociferously oppose educational choice.

Indeed, none of the Democratic candidates even want to talk about the role of choice in education, as evidenced by their unanimous refusal to participate in the Seventy Four’s education forum with Campbell Brown.

Educational choice has few champions on the left today, but it was not always so. Ron Matus of redefinED Online has been chronicling the history and status of “the Voucher Left” recently.

Civil rights leaders and Berkeley college professor professors, liberal lions like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and leftist radicals like Ivan Illich alike once proudly supported choice policies they believed would empower the powerless, expand access to opportunity, and foster diversity.

The 1968 “Proposal for a Poor Children’s Bill of Rights,” coauthored by Harvard Graduate School of Education dean Ted Sizer, was a left-wing, school-choice manifesto. It opened by “condemning America for failing to provide equal opportunity in education” and “ends with a knock on the war in Vietnam”:

Ours is a simple proposal: to use education — vastly improved and powerful education — as the principal vehicle for upward mobility. While a complex of strategies must be designed to accomplish this, we wish here to stress one: a program to give money directly to poor children (through their parents) to assist in paying for their education.

By doing so we might both create significant competition among schools serving the poor (and thus improve the schools) and meet in an equitable way the extra costs of teaching the children of the poor.

I have qualms with some of their proposals. Sizer’s proposal called for a federal voucher program, but school choice is best left to the states. The proto-education savings accounts that Jack Coons and Stephen Sugarman proposed would have forced participating private schools to “to take all students who applied, unless excess demand required a lottery,” eliminating their freedom to choose their own admissions criteria.

Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) support school choice, but they also push for mandatory testing and other regulations that would restrict or even undermine choice. That said, while important, these are merely disagreements over the details. These liberals and leftists agreed with Milton Friedman’s key insights that choice and competition would benefit the poor the most and foster diversity and pluralism.

One longs for the day when coalitional politics no longer prevent elected Democrats from embracing greater choice in education.

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