



We Can't Vouch for "School Choice"

Our view on a cornerstone of Gov. Jindal's school reform package

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Readers of this newspaper are well aware that Gov. Bobby Jindal spent much of his first term in office as a frequent flyer in our Pooyie! franchise, more often under the Pas Bon and Couillon headings for cuts to higher education and health care, pushing to privatize some of the state's most efficient programs, notably the Office of Group Benefits and its half-billion-dollar surplus, and decrying 2009's federal stimulus while passing out stimulus checks emblazoned with his name.

But The Ind has been steadfast in its support of upending the status quo in public education both locally and statewide — clearly and empirically, public education in Louisiana is not working well and must be revamped — and we're ready to give qualified praise where it's due.

There's much to like among Jindal's proposals on changing public education in Louisiana — the details of which will be hashed out beginning March 12 when the legislative session convenes.

We're ready to embrace the governor's proposal to give school districts more flexibility in how they compensate teachers — no more automatic, across-the-board pay raises — and we're tentatively behind changes to how teachers are hired, fired and achieve tenure.

But we greet the governor's push to expand the private school voucher program — the governor is doggedly trying to re-brand it a "scholarship" program — with a reaction somewhere between wary and suspicious.

Nearly 400,000 public school students in Louisiana attend schools that are rated C, D or F — the threshold for voucher eligibility under Jindal's plan. The vast majority of children eligible for a voucher will not find a slot in a private school; there simply aren't enough private schools to accommodate the need.

But as newly minted state Superintendent John White told us recently, school choice "is going to stimulate people who are outside the traditional K-12 system to create new options."

In other words, privatization.

Gov. Jindal, we suspect with but a hint of hyperbole, would be willing to privatize just about any function of government. He proved it in his bid to privatize the aforementioned OGB despite overwhelming evidence that the agency is working just fine and that privatization would have an adverse economic effect on retirees.

There are so many connections, well-chronicled by mainstream news sources, between the "school choice" voucher movement and wealthy, hyper-conservative foundations — the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation — and individuals like the Koch brothers and the DeVos

and Walton families whose ultimate goal is the dismantling of government regulation.

We're willing to set aside the political shell game that lurks behind education reform, and we do acknowledge that the school choice movement has, on the surface anyway, bipartisan support. But even if we look past the governor's track record of ideological exercise, Jindal's actions of late suggest an agenda based on rhetoric, not reform.

It's no coincidence that Jindal's aggressive marketing campaign is relying heavily on the Black Alliance for Educational Options, a national school choice advocacy group that pours millions into splashy advertisements featuring happy black families extolling the virtues of school choice.

But there's a lot of evidence the BAEO is financially underwritten by some very radical forces, not the least of which is the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation. Milton Friedman laid out the real goal of vouchers in the 1950s, according to a 1995 Cato Institute briefing paper: "Vouchers are not an end in themselves; they are a means to make a transition from a government to a free-market system."

Also joining Team Jindal in the education reform trenches is The Heartland Institute, which issued a press release Jan. 31 announcing Jindal's endorsement of school choice legislation crafted by the nonprofit. The Heartland Institute's president was quoted in 1997 as saying, "[W]e see vouchers as a major step toward the complete privatization of schooling. In fact, after careful study, we have come to the conclusion that they are the only way to dismantle the current socialist regime."

C'est what? The current socialist regime? Oh yeah, Bill Clinton was in office back then.

Equally troubling is Jindal's hedge on committing to holding private schools that educate voucher children accountable, saying instead that "parents are the best accountability program."

Well, no, they're not — standardized tests are, according to state law. But as staff writer Heather Miller's reporting demonstrates, getting an accurate picture from the state Department of Education of just how many voucher kids in New Orleans' Recovery School District are actually being tested is a herculean feat, and the data arguably suggests they're not doing very well to begin with.

Why in the world would we not expect private schools taking our tax money to be accountable, to demonstrate that they're doing a better job with our money than public schools in terms of attaining educational progress? Could it have anything to do with the possibility that were we to get a true measure of how these voucher students are performing, we'd see the voucher, er, scholarship, program as the boondoggle it may well be?