



'Superman' and silver bullets

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There may be no such thing as a silver bullet in public policy, but universal parental choice is the closest thing we have to one — assuming our politicians summon the courage to run with it.

Time is running out for another generation of American students — yet despite overwhelming evidence of failure of government “solutions,” there remains little willingness to think outside of the bureaucratic box when it comes to raising academic achievement.

Even the latest indictment of the failed public education monopoly — a documentary called “Waiting for ‘Superman’” directed by liberal filmmaker Davis Guggenheim — fails to take the necessary step of endorsing solutions that fall outside of the public system.

Currently, more than 1.2 million students drop out of school each year. Seventy percent of eighth-graders cannot read at grade level. America’s standardized test scores are falling further behind the rest of the industrialized world — including the scores of our “best and brightest.”

At all levels of government, bureaucrats have tried to solve these problems by spending more money. In fact, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics per pupil federal education spending has risen almost 190 percent since 1970 (after adjusting for inflation). Keep in mind that this money is being spent despite the fact that our Constitution gives the federal government no authority to meddle in education.

Meanwhile, state and local education spending has also exploded — now consuming 27 cents of every dollar that these governments collect each year.

Cognizant of growing public impatience with such a mediocre return on taxpayer investment, the next “solution” proposed by the bureaucrats is focused on the institution of government-run accountability — most recently the federal No Child Left Behind law. Yet despite political rhetoric about erasing the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” the harsh reality is that government-run accountability has done nothing.

No Child Left Behind “inflates state test scores but the inflated scores don’t mean real learning has improved,” said Lisa Guisbond, a testing reform analyst with the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

The latest “solution?” Expanded parental choices — except instead of actually providing parents with these choices, government bureaucrats continue to control their availability (and funding) while keeping the money firmly ensconced within the public system. These are the “choices” being advocated by the makers of Waiting for “Superman.”

“The film doesn’t promote real, essential reform: Taking money away from special-interest dominated government schools and letting parents control it,” writes Neal McCluskey, Associate Director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

By supporting public school choice, charter schools and limited, means-tested private school choice, bureaucrats are promoting the illusion of choice without actually providing it — much like government-run accountability has provided the illusion of progress without actually attaining it.

Parental choice could be the silver bullet — but if it is to succeed, it must be universal.

America’s school children shouldn’t be forced to wait on “Superman.” They shouldn’t be forced to wait on anyone. They deserve real choices that promote real accountability and real achievement — and they deserve them now.

The author is chairman of Americans for Limited Government.

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