



If teachers' unions truly want racial integration, they should support school choice

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July 24, 2017

As teachers know: facts matter. It's not clear, however, that they matter to American Federation for Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who recently called school choice programs "only slightly more polite cousins of segregation" and claimed that the "real pioneers of private school choice were the white politicians who resisted school integration."

Weingarten's funhouse-mirror perspective not only distorts the history of school choice, but also inverts the present reality of schooling. In fact, six decades after the U.S. Supreme Court issued *Brown v. Board of Education*, our district-based public school system is still highly segregated by race.

School choice didn't cause that; in fact, choice programs are improving racial integration and benefit disadvantaged minorities the most.

Contrary to Weingarten's telling, the idea for school vouchers dates back at least as far as the 1791, when Thomas Paine argued in *The Rights of Man* that the government should provide public funds to low-income families to send their children to school. As education policy scholar Rick Hess noted recently, "Rather than promote universal education via publicly operated schools, Paine called for giving families the funds and then letting them make the arrangements they saw fit."

Likewise, in his 1859 book *On Liberty*, liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill argued in favor of giving parents public funds to educate their children rather than create a public school monopoly that would risk "establish[ing] a despotism over the mind."

In the modern era, the longest-running school voucher program was enacted in Wisconsin in 1990, sponsored by Rep. Annette Polly Williams, an African-American Democrat who wanted help lift underprivileged black children out of the failing district school system in which they were trapped. Explaining her support for vouchers, Williams said, "My fight is for our, for my, black children — to be able to access this system and get the best that this system offers."

Weingarten ignores all this, choosing instead to locate the origin of school choice in the efforts of segregationists in Prince Edward County, Va., to use a voucher-like system to avoid racial integration in the wake of the *Brown v. Board* decision. Of course, if the efforts of a few segregationists to use school choice taints the movement decades later, then the much longer

history of racially-segregated public schools—that were much more widespread and whose effects are still felt today—should be far more damning.

It is absurd to judge policies by the motivations of those who supported them decades ago. If that were the case, Weingarten should be campaigning against the minimum wage, which early 20th-century Progressives supported to keep blacks and immigrants out of the labor market.

Rather, policies should be judged by current effects. And by that standard, if racial integration is the goal, the district school system should be abolished. If school choice programs are the "cousins of segregation," then, as the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey wrote, district schools are its parents.

Although *Brown v. Board* abolished legal segregation, a 2016 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that district schools are growing increasingly more segregated today. Moreover, according to the GAO, schools where 75 percent to 100 percent of students are black or Hispanic "offered disproportionately fewer math, science, and college preparatory courses and had disproportionately higher rates of students who were held back in 9th grade, suspended, or expelled" compared to other schools.

By contrast, school choice benefits minorities the most. Last year, nearly 450,000 students exercised educational choice using a voucher, tax-credit scholarship, or education savings account. Nearly 100,000 of those were in Florida, where 68 percent of tax-credit scholarship recipients were black or Hispanic students from households with an average income of only about \$24,000 a year. Likewise, disadvantaged minorities constituted 60 percent of choice students in North Carolina, 87 percent in Louisiana, and 97 percent in Washington, D.C.

By breaking the link between schooling and housing, these choice options are fostering increased racial integration. Of 10 studies on the effects of school choice on racial integration in the United States, nine find that choice policies improve racial integration and one finds no visible effect.

Moreover, research on the academic effects of school choice consistently find that minorities benefit the most—likely because they are the most choice-deprived. Even where overall effects were neutral, disadvantaged minorities exercising school choice were significantly more likely to score higher on standardized tests, graduate high school, and enroll in college and obtain a college degree than their non-choice peers.

It's no wonder then that polls consistently find that school choice policies are highly popular among African-Americans and Hispanics. According to the 2016 Education Next poll, 64 percent of African-Americans and 62 percent of Hispanics supported tax-credit scholarships. In the 2015 poll, 58 percent of African-Americans and 65 percent of Hispanics express support for universal vouchers.

Weingarten is aware of these inconvenient truths; she just chooses to ignore them because it's a lot easier to throw mud than get one's own house in order.

Policymakers should ignore the fallacious rantings of a special interest group desperate to maintain the status quo. Instead, they should listen to the black and brown parents who are

desperate to provide a better future for their children—and who need educational choice to reach that goal.