

## Why the Right Hates Public Education

By Barbara Miner – June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013

---

In an article about education, it's appropriate to start with a pop quiz. Today's question: Republican strategists want to privatize education because:

- a) Education is a multibillion dollar market, and the private sector is eager to get its hands on those dollars.
- b) Conservatives are devoted to the free market and believe that private is inherently superior to public.
- c) Shrinking public education furthers the Republican Party goal of drastically reducing the public sector.
- d) Privatization undermines teacher unions, a key base of support for the Democratic Party.
- e) Privatization rhetoric can be used to woo African American and Latino voters to the Republican Party.
- f) All of the above.

OK, I admit it, the answer's obvious: all of the above. But in the debates over education policy, the Republican political agenda (see d and e) is often invisible.

Occasionally, Republican strategists let the cat out of the bag and admit that vouchers--which divert public dollars to private schools--are about politics, not education.

Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform and one of the most influential Republican strategists in Washington, has long recognized the partisan value of vouchers, sometimes euphemistically referred to as "choice." "School choice reaches right into the heart of the Democratic coalition and takes people out of it," he said in a 1998 interview with *Insight*, the magazine of the conservative Washington Times.

Norquist and others see great political benefit in going after the teachers' unions. During the last thirty years, as private sector unionism has declined, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) have grown in strength. Today, the 2.7 million-member NEA is the country's largest union. The AFT has one million members, mostly in education but also in health care and the public sector.

While both teacher unions overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party, conservatives especially hate the NEA. It is larger, more geographically diverse, with members in every Congressional district in the country, and more likely to push a liberal agenda that includes social issues such as gay rights.

As the conservative Landmark Legal Foundation complained this fall, the NEA is "the nation's largest, most powerful, and most political union."

The teacher unions back up their support for the Democratic Party with money and grassroots organization. After all, public schools exist in every municipality and county in the nation. Unlike manufacturing, teaching cannot be outsourced to Mexico, China, or Bangladesh.

In mainstream publications, conservatives tend to muffle their partisan antagonism toward teacher unions. Not so in conservative publications and documents.

The issue comes down to "a matter of power," said Terry Moe, a senior fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution and co-author of the book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, in an interview with the Heartland Institute in Chicago this summer.

The NEA and AFT "have a lot of money for campaign contributions and for lobbying," he said. "They also have a lot of electoral clout because they have many activists out in the trenches in every political district. . . . No other group can claim this kind of geographically uniform political activity. They are everywhere."

School vouchers are a way to diminish that power. "School choice allows children and money to leave the system, and that means there will be fewer public teacher jobs, lower union membership, and lower dues," Moe explains.

For those in the thick of the debate, it's long been obvious that vouchers are an attack on teacher unions. Even Wisconsin State Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, an African American who helped start the Milwaukee voucher program, the country's first, now admits as much. "The main motivation of some of the choice supporters was to weaken public education unions," she wrote in a letter this summer to Governor Jim Doyle.

Eliminating public education may seem unAmerican. But a growing number of movement conservatives have signed a proclamation from the Alliance for the Separation of School and State that favors "ending government involvement in education." Signatories include such Washington notables as David Boaz and Ed Crane of the Cato Institute; conservative author Dinesh D'Souza; Dean Clancy, who is an education policy analyst for House Majority Leader Dennis Hastert; and Howard Phillips, president of the Conservative Caucus.

Wisconsin State Representative Chris Sinicki, who was a Milwaukee School Board member when vouchers began in Milwaukee in 1990, says there is no doubt that vouchers "are a Republican strategy to take down public education and the unions. This is partisan politics, completely."

Which brings us back to our pop quiz and, in particular, to Answer e: Privatization rhetoric can be used to woo African American and Latino voters to the Republican Party.

In the 2000 Presidential election, Bush garnered only 8 percent of the African American vote and about 35 percent of the Latino vote. (Overall, less than 10 percent of Bush's votes came from minorities.) The following year, Republican strategist Matthew Dowd outlined a plan to boost African American support to 13-15 percent and Latino support to 38-40 percent for the 2004 election.

While universal vouchers remain the goal, for tactical reasons conservatives have wrapped vouchers in the mantle of concern for poor African Americans and Latinos. Indeed, voucher supporters are fond of calling school choice the new civil rights movement. This plays well not

only with voters of color but also with liberal suburban whites who, while they may be leery of allowing significant numbers of minorities into their schools, nonetheless support the concept of equal rights for all.

Conservatives and their front groups in the African American and Latino communities have not been shy about comparing voucher opponents to Southern segregationists. During the Congressional push for vouchers in Washington, D.C., this fall, groups such as D.C. Parents for School Choice launched a particularly vicious campaign against prominent Democrats. "Forty years ago, politicians like George Wallace stood in the doors of good schools trying to prevent poor black children from getting in," one ad said, comparing voucher opponents like Senator Edward Kennedy to Wallace.

Virginia Walden-Ford, executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, was vague in explaining to the Washington community newspaper *The Common Denominator* how her group financed the ads. She did admit that over the years her group had received money from the Bradley Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and Children First America--all prominent conservative organizations supporting vouchers. The Institute for Justice, a libertarian legal group, provided media support. So did Audrey Mullen, a signer of the Separation of School and State proclamation.

Even if Republicans fail to woo African Americans and Latinos to the Republican Party, they may dampen African American and Latino voter turnout--a neutralization strategy, as it were.

"The strategy is to get young black people not to vote," says Michael Charney, editor of *The Critique*, the newspaper of the teachers' union in Cleveland, which also has a voucher program. "These radio commercials are aimed at the hip-hop generation. The goal is to discredit Democrats and breed cynicism."

The commercials, he continues, "are part of a conscious strategy by the most advanced elements in the electoral Republican machine. It's smart from their view, even if it is disgusting."

David Sheridan, an analyst for the NEA, agrees it will be tough for the Republicans to win over African American voters. "But I think it's different with the Hispanic audience," he says. "I think they see this as a major effort to get more Hispanic voters into the Republican camp."

The Republican emphasis on vouchers runs the risk of alienating moderate Republicans who support public education. Such support is strong not only in rural areas where public schools are a vital part of the community and private schools are few, but also in suburban communities with strong, well-funded public schools.

Senator Norm Coleman, Republican of Minnesota, cautions his Republican colleagues that they shouldn't even use the word "vouchers," which he refers to as "the deadly V-word."

"In my state, it's a pretty divisive word," he warned them in a speech on the Senate floor this fall.

But that won't stop conservatives like Norquist, who view vouchers as a key ingredient in their effort to "downsize" government services. "The problem is that the federal government hands out billions of dollars, and people will lie, cheat, steal, or bribe to get it," Norquist said in an interview with Reasononline, the website of the libertarian Reason Foundation. "If you have a big cake, and you put it under the sink and then you wonder why the cockroaches are in your

kitchen, I don't think any sprays or blocking the holes in the walls are going to get rid of the cockroaches. You've got to throw the cake in the trash so that the cockroaches don't have something to come for."

The American people do not view public schoolteachers and students as cockroaches. The overwhelming majority strongly support public schools. They don't want them dismantled; they just want them to work better.

The attack by Norquist and his ilk is nothing less than a highly partisan attempt to undermine teacher unions and the Democratic Party, destroying our American tradition of public education in the process.