

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Teachers' Union vs. D.C. Children

Why do so many Democrats seem to favor the teachers' union over poor minority students?

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Even as the Supreme Court seems on the verge of delivering an important blow to teachers' unions (and other public-employee unions), Congress is gearing up for another battle that will pit the political clout of public-school teachers against the future of our children.

This Monday, the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*, and a majority of the justices seemed sympathetic to the idea that teachers and other public employees should not be forced to pay dues to support collective bargaining on behalf of issues on which they might disagree with the union (such as seniority-based layoffs). If the Court rules in favor of the plaintiffs, it will significantly weaken the power of public-employee unions.

But for now, those unions — especially the teachers' unions — remain enormously powerful, and that power will be on full display as Congress takes up the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program in the next couple of months.

There is no disputing that the Washington, D.C., school system is one of the worst in the nation. Although D.C. schools spend nearly \$30,000 per student each year, more than a third of students fail to graduate. In a test to determine whether high-school students were college ready, only 10 percent of D.C. students met proficiency standards in math, and just a quarter met the reading standards. The story is even worse for black students; only 4 percent met the math standards. Violence is an ever-present threat in many schools.

The failure of D.C.'s schools has profound and long-lasting consequences. For example, we know that nearly 29 percent of people aged 25 and over who did not have a high-school diploma lived in poverty in 2014, compared to 14.2 percent of high-school graduates with no college, and just 5 percent of college graduates. And those high-school dropouts will stay poor. With all the talk about poverty and inequality that we hear, let's remember that a failing public-school system is one of the reasons for those problems.

In response, President Bush established the Opportunity Scholarship Program in 2004. The program provides scholarships (vouchers) that low-income D.C. families can use to send their children to private schools in the District, including religiously affiliated schools. President Obama tried to kill the program when he took office, but the Republican Congress revived it over his objections in 2012.

The scholarships are targeted to those students most in need. The average household income for families participating in the program is under \$21,000. More than 83 percent of those families are African-American, and another 14 percent are Hispanic/Latino.

It is hard to argue with the success of the program. A random-assignment study conducted by researchers from the University of Arkansas — and funded by the U.S. Department of Education — found that students participating in the scholarship program were 21 percentage points more likely to graduate than students who remained in the D.C. public-schools. Perhaps more importantly, students attending those public schools designated as “in need of improvement” were 20 percentage points more likely to graduate if they used a scholarship to move to a different school. Fully 88 percent of scholarship students went on to college. Fully 95 percent of parents whose children received scholarships reported that they were happy with their child’s academic progress. As the Democrats keep lecturing us in other contexts, “The science is clear.”

But despite this record of success, the omnibus budget deal failed to reauthorize the program beyond this year. That means that in order to preserve the program for the 2016–17 school year, Congress will have to either push through a stand-alone funding bill in the face of ferocious opposition from Democratic lawmakers and the teachers’ unions, or hope to include the funding in some future budget deal. President Obama, having defunded the program once, is expected to oppose reauthorization once again. D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton is unalterably opposed to the program.

Republicans should not back down. Indeed, they should not only fully fund the Opportunity Scholarship Program, they should expand it. The current program has provided help to just 1,259 students this year. Thousands more students are on waiting lists.

This is an election year. We can expect endless exhortations that we should fund some program or pursue some policy “for the children.” Well, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program actually does something for those children who need help most. It provides D.C.’s poorest residents with the same educational choices President Obama and highly paid lobbyists enjoy.

It’s really a simple choice: poor, minority children, or wealthy, powerful unions. Where do we stand?

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