



Obama: Hands-off Education!

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Posted 10/15/2009 ET

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, now in its fifth year providing scholarships to 1,715 students from households below the poverty line located within the District, is the latest school choice option under fire from an administration that seems increasingly determined to mandate one education model to the detriment of any others. The program is actually part of a three sector school choice initiative for Washington, D.C. but is the only program in the initiative currently facing cuts.

The program, which extends non-public education options to families that would otherwise never have a choice in schools, has generated plenty of success stories on the individual level since it was implemented in January 2004. A Georgetown University Public Policy Institute study found that within two years into the program, it was already having the intended results, including parental satisfaction over 85 percent. However, on April 6, the Department of Education sent 216 participants in the program letters advising them that the program was going to shut down, an approach protested by the D.C. city council.

The surprising opposition to a successful education program in D.C. seems part of a larger pattern of opposition to variety in education options. It also fits into a recent pattern of the Obama administration seeking influence over education. Events over the past nine months have documented Obama's interest in and understanding of the importance of education:

A March talking point that revealed some of Obama's approach to education was his belief that the education of American children didn't stand up against that of the South Koreans. The *Korea Times* reacted with surprise at the time, noting that their country's education system is usually criticized for its dependence on private tutoring. Yet Obama remains committed to the idea that children need to spend

more time in schools, a quantity-over-quality argument that inherently demands more control over students' minds by mandating more of their time.

Then, early last month, there was Obama's unprecedented speech to public school students. The blandness of the announcement was quickly overcome by the furor in parents' protests against the president's plan to speak directly into the ears of their children. It was condemned as an act of big government interference by several state politicians, including Florida's Republican Party chairman Jim Greer, Missouri's Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder and Texas Gov. Rick Perry. The Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom also opposed this particular use of the presidential bully pulpit.

Also last month, the House passed the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, which would force all student loans for higher education to become federal by eliminating subsidized and private loan programs. If the bill passes the Senate, it will become extremely difficult for some private and non-traditional colleges that do not accept federal funds to continue to operate. (Examples include Grove City College, Pa., Hillsdale College, Mich., and Principia College, Mo.) The bill was introduced by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and follows the pattern by including a proposal to fund a federal grant program that would consolidate early childhood education programs.

Even the president's first attempt at health care reform, H.R. 3200, contained provisions for early child education and home visitation that has earned it opposition by the Home School Legal Defense Association for compromising the right of parents to make decisions for their children's education.

The conclusion is that the Obama administration's education agenda is no more than increased federal intrusion into the American educational system. Some Americans, particularly those whose previous education choices are being threatened by current federal initiatives, are beginning to wonder about Obama's long-term goals.

"It is very fair to say that the administration has been pushing for more federal control in education," said Dan Lips, senior policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation. "That was evident early on when the 'stimulus' bill included an

unprecedented sum (\$97 billion) for new education spending. They have also been supporting creating new powers for the federal government in education—from national academic standards to new preschool programs.”

Education “reform” is important to the president, but only the kind he wants.

Opposition exists. This month, D.C. Parents for School Choice are running a local ad campaign as part of their ongoing fight to save the D.C. Opportunities program. Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, said that the ads appeal directly to President Obama because of his pledge to support educational programs that work. “[I]t is important that he come forward and help to protect a program that is successful,” she said. “Washington, DC and what happens here is in the eye of the nation...we are in a fishbowl and the states watch us. If we lose the fight here it will impact how legislators commit themselves to fighting for school choice programs in their states.”

The ads ask Obama to step in on the side of the program in part because he attended a private school in Hawaii, and he sends his daughters to Sidwell Friends, one of the very charter schools that also accepts students from the D.C. Opportunity program.

In fact, according to an April 2009 report by the Heritage Foundation, 20 percent of the members of Congress attended a private high school, as did Obama, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Vice President Joe Biden. Additionally, 38 percent of the members of Congress had at one time enrolled at least one child in private school.

Private school, charter school, school vouchers, tuition tax credits and home school are all options that school choice supporters are fighting for nationwide. Ford said that parental rights unite school choice advocates. “[W]e have seen that when parents choose their children's educational environment, they become more involved and their children thrive,” she said. “We have seen a trend over the last few years where more and more legislators are taking a look at their educational systems and understanding that more has to be done to help children, and they are looking outside the box in trying to find a way to fix the problem.”

School choice and educational options are the latest front in a clash between the

federal government and states' rights. Currently, it is possible to plot on a map the varying extent of liberty different states extend to parents seeking alternative educational options. It seems possible that the Obama administration seeks to limit those options by mandating one standard approach.

In other words, when it comes to education, this administration seems to be pushing for another public option.

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