

NATIONAL REVIEW

How Low Will the Teachers' Unions Go?

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I am starting to think that the teachers' unions are incapable of shame.

In a speech to her union's convention Thursday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten asserted that "The real pioneers of private school choice were the white politicians who resisted school integration." She called school-choice programs the "only slightly more polite cousins of segregation." She compared Betsy DeVos, the U.S. secretary of education, to climate-change deniers for supporting school-voucher programs. And she exhorted the crowd to resist school-choice advocates' "decades-long campaign to protect the economic and political power of the few against the rights of the many."

What nonsense.

Weingarten's segregation claim comes from a recent report entitled "The Racist Origins of Private School Vouchers." Written by the Center for American Progress (CAP), a left-wing advocacy group, the historically inaccurate report was ready-made for her stump speeches.

"Weingarten's claim doesn't pass the laugh test," says Jason Bedrick, director of policy for EdChoice. "She distorts the history of education policy and ignores the facts on the ground. Public schools were once racially segregated by law and they are de facto segregated today. Meanwhile, disadvantaged minorities gain the most from expanded educational choice."

In fact, as the American Enterprise Institute's [Frederick Hess pointed out earlier this week](#), the long history of vouchers begins with Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill seeking to help poor families to educate their children in the 18th and 19th centuries. The first major push to let American families send their children to schools of their choice using public funds was led by Catholics seeking to escape discriminatory public schools.

Moreover, American voucher programs were not "pioneered" by resisters to school integration. Hess shows that America's first school-voucher program was the GI Bill, which paid for WWII veterans to attend college. Afterward, even the liberals in Lyndon Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity turned to vouchers as a way to help black children suffering in segregated public schools.

"Vouchers were seized upon by racists as one of the many tools they used to resist desegregation. That is true," Hess writes. "But that's only a small piece of a much larger story. Vouchers have long been proposed as a tool to empower families, temper the reach of the state, democratize access to education, and offer better options to those failed by the state." Weingarten and the AFT deliberately ignore this history.

Moreover, the lie that vouchers are the “polite cousins of segregation” is particularly egregious because the overwhelming weight of the empirical evidence suggests that vouchers actually improve school integration and fight segregation. Seven of eight methodologically sound studies examining vouchers’ effect on school integration in America found positive impacts on integration. The eighth found no statistically significant impact.

As usual, the truth is the exact opposite of what the teachers’ unions say.

School choice helps low-income black and Hispanic children more than anyone else. In Florida’s private school-choice program, the largest in the nation, 68 percent of the 100,000 scholarship recipients are black or Hispanic. The average recipient’s household income is just \$24,074. Ninety-seven percent of scholarship recipients in Washington, D.C.’s Opportunity Scholarship Program are minority students. Their average household income is just \$21,434. The Louisiana Scholarship program has 88 percent minority enrolment. Need I go on?

Across the country, voucher and tax-credit programs are allowing low-income parents, many of them minorities, to choose better schools for their children. Wealthier families already have a range of choices. Public schools in wealthy areas tend to perform well. If they don’t, parents can often afford to pay expensive private-school tuition on their own. Poorer families, on the other hand, are unable to afford private schools and thus are held hostage by the inferior schools in their low-income school districts.

That is why these families love school choice: It empowers them to help their children receive a good education.

Poll after poll reveals that school choice is popular, especially with minority families. In 2016, an *Education Next* poll found that 64 percent of African-Americans supported scholarship tax credits. Fifty-seven percent of Hispanics supported universal vouchers. Support has remained in the 60 percent range since at least 1999, as the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey has pointed out.

For families participating in school-choice programs, satisfaction is far higher. This is not even contested; school choice improves parent satisfaction, across the country, in study after study. Shouldn’t that matter to the teachers’ unions? Shouldn’t they care that parents typically like school choice, and typically think it helps their children?

It doesn’t, and they don’t. In her speech, Weingarten dodged the issue: “I’ve never heard a parent say, ‘That school doesn’t work for my kid. So I want to engage in an ideologically driven market-based experiment that commodifies education and has been proven to be ineffective,’” she said.

Well, when you put it that way, neither have I. But parents across the country have been telling anyone who will listen that they want options. They want to use charter schools and vouchers and scholarship tax credits to get their children out of failing schools and into better ones.

If Weingarten truly cared about school segregation and inequality, she would realize that the public-school system exacerbates both problems. It is a monopoly — with an opt-out for the rich,

like most other monopolies — that strands low-income children in mediocre, heavily segregated school districts.

Instead, Weingarten and her ilk lie and smear and use any means necessary to stop poor parents from choosing better schools for their kids. They do so because preserving the public-school monopoly is in their own narrow interests.

But it's not in anyone else's.