



The Parent Point

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR WASHINGTON'S PRIVATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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What if CHOICE was a choice?

Immediately following the June 27th U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Zelman v. Simmons-Harris case which effectively set the legal parameters for constitutional school choice programs, editorial commentaries lamenting the "abandonment" of public schools began to dot the op-ed pages. This was to be expected, given the significant changes the ruling could spark.

Unfortunately, too many of these articles stop short of presenting the full story to be learned from Cleveland. Suppose the Court's decision was viewed as constructive opportunity? Imagine if we really believed parents could make intelligent, informed decisions based on a variety of options? What if school choice really was just that... a choice?

No easy exercise. Especially in Washington, there seems to be more questions than answers. But the road to solutions should be paved with a full understanding. Consider these brief points:

Since Washington's Constitution is more restrictive, vouchers could never happen here.

No doubt about it, we're a "Blaine" state. Like thirty-seven other states, our constitution contains prohibitive language, championed by Maine Congressman James Blaine in the late 19th century, which seems to place barriers denying state support for private, religious K-12 schools. What is becoming increasingly clear to historians, legal scholars and, in turn, state governments, however, is an understanding of the insidious anti-sectarian bias that was behind the insertion of these constitutional provisions into charter - in many cases as a condition for ratifying admission to the Union. In recently upholding the tax credit proposal now fully operational in Arizona, their state Supreme Court identified the Blaine Amendment as a "...clear manifestation of religious bigotry, part of a crusade manufactured... to counter what was perceived as a growing Catholic menace."

Opportunity #1: Acknowledge and erase injustice in our own founding document.

Under Washington's Constitution, it is the "paramount duty" of the state to provide for public education.

Actually, the preamble to Article IX reads, "It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders...." Section 2 of the same Article then mandates the legislature to "...provide for a general and uniform system of public schools." It would seem that, absent Blaine language prohibiting direct aid to religious schools, complimentary systems (the common schools and alternative options for schooling) could coexist and actually thrive.

Opportunity #2: Establish a unified citizen effort to meet the goal of providing for the education of ALL children.

Vouchers rob money from the public system.

This oft-quoted objection is usually the most misrepresented. The Cleveland program actually INCREASED the funding available in the city's public schools on a per capita basis. The original language of the plan allowed for Cleveland's public schools to keep up to 55 percent of the state allocation for a child (at that time, an average of \$5,600) even if that child's parents accepted the maximum voucher amount of \$2,500 to spend on private school tuition. Surrounding districts stood to gain even more. They would receive the regular state aid for each child accepted PLUS the \$2,500 voucher.

Opportunity #3: Craft good programs that benefit all children no matter what type of school they attend.

Voucher proposals consistently fail at the polls by wide margins.

Recent attempts in Michigan, California and even here in Washington would suggest that to be true. A closer analysis would show that each effort might have been defeated even before election day by problems not uncommon to proposals that seek to overhaul the "system." Tremendous influxes of opposition funds to create last minute doubt and serious lack of consensus among the issue's natural supporters were certainly contributing factors. Most evident in every effort was an inability of the supporters to establish the "win-win" nature of their proposal. How would a "yes" vote help guarantee the quality of education for every child in the state?

Opportunity #4: Realize the synergy of options rather than the wedge of differences.

If we continue to believe that we can't do this job together, Washington's kids pay the price. Private school supporters do not want the public system to fail. The 80,000 students currently enrolled in private schools in this state represent another half billion dollars annually the state would have to produce if these schools were to disappear tomorrow, not to mention an additional billion dollars or more to provide for learning space. Most of those students are enrolled in schools located in the larger urban districts. At last report, over 30% of school-aged children living in the Seattle city limits attend private schools. Think of the dramatic ally those parents represent when forming legislation that would benefit not only their neighbor's child, but theirs as well.

What if we cared enough to really give all parents a choice? The Court has presented us with a grand opportunity. The rest is a test of our courage to try something new.

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