

It's time for school choice

We long ago should have given parents more options

Tuesday, September 20, 2011
By Ronald T. Bowes

Shortly after doctors performed a high-risk heart-liver transplant on Pennsylvania Gov. Robert Casey at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the governor reflected on his career in the Philadelphia Inquirer: "I would run for a third term if I could because I would like to work on some issues that I have been unable to accomplish, such as tax reform and school choice."

That was 1993, yet school choice is once again a hot topic in Harrisburg.

Earlier in Casey's tenure, the state Senate passed a voucher bill that would have provided up to \$900 a year per student so parents could send children to a nonpublic school if they so chose. The Wall Street Journal wrote the next day that "Pennsylvania may become the first state in the nation to enact a true educational choice program."

The bill, however, was defeated in the House by 114-89. The opposition ran a radio campaign that stated, "Dec. 7, 1941 ... Remember Pearl Harbor ... A sneak attack that shocked our country ... Now another sneak attack is about to be launched -- this time in Harrisburg. State legislators are planning to raise your taxes ... again."

The ad was sponsored by a group supporting public education, for which spending had risen from \$4 billion in 1980 to \$9 billion in 1993. That figure is now approximately \$26 billion.

AFL-CIO President William George called the voucher plan "un-American." Yet voucher supporters did not give up.

School choice bills were introduced in 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1998. Finally, after years of fighting for an educational voucher, the Pennsylvania General Assembly went part way and passed the first corporate tax credit for education in the nation in 2001. It was proudly signed by Gov. Tom Ridge and for the past decade has garnered support from both sides of the political aisle.

The tax credit allows businesses to divert some of their state taxes to both public and nonpublic schools. The former for enrichment programs and the latter to provide tuition assistance. The program is widely popular.

The problem with tax credits, though, is that not enough students can be helped. In the Diocese of Pittsburgh Catholic schools, we have identified, through an evaluation process, that families who would like to send their children to our schools need \$11 million in assistance to do so. We can provide only half that total through the tax-credit program and various donations.

Too many poor parents are unable to "sculpt the souls of their children," as Prof. John Coons of the University of California Berkeley put it, referring to those who have little or no control over their children's education. Parents with resources can choose any public, private or parochial school. That's why former President Bill Clinton, President Barack Obama and recently Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago could select private schools for their children despite their public opposition to school choice.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given their children." It also says that education shall be compulsory and "free in the elementary and fundamental stages."

Pennsylvania's Public School Code of 1949 states "that it is the policy of the commonwealth to preserve the primary right and obligation of the parent or parents or person or persons in loco parentis to a child to choose the education and training for such child."

In 1925, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that "a child is not a mere creature of the state. Those who nurture a child and direct his or her destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare a child for additional obligations." This decision affirmed parents' right to choose the educational path for their children, but public policy

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currently impedes this choice in the form of double payment. Parents who wish to send their children to nonpublic schools must pay both taxes and tuition.

I am not arguing that school choice is the answer to all our problems in education, but some things we know. Parents want and need choice. It empowers them, forces them to become more involved in their children's education and gives them a sense of ownership.

School choice places children first in the educational process. It instills competition and accountability. School choice releases the creative talents of teachers and administrators. It creates the environment and generates the energy for other reforms to take root.

Finally, school choice saves taxpayers money by preserving cost-effective, quality, nonpublic schools while encouraging public schools to spend more wisely and efficiently.

After decades of waiting for competition, accountability and choice, let's allow this commonsense approach -- the same approach we use in higher education with great success -- to transform primary and secondary education in Pennsylvania.

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First published on September 20, 2011 at 12:00 am

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