

Opinion:

Tide turns for school-choice forces

Katrina aid bill a watershed moment for the foes of monopolistic schools

By Alan Bonsteel , Orange County Register, Wednesday, January 4, 2006

Last year could hardly have ended with a more resounding victory for school choice advocates. On Friday, Dec. 30, President Bush signed into law the Hurricane Katrina relief bill, which gives the families of displaced New Orleans K-12 schoolchildren receiving federal educational aid a choice of public and private schools.

The battle over freedom of choice versus compulsory assignment to public schools was seen by both sides as such a turning point in the larger war that the National Education Association teachers union was willing to put itself through public humiliation by going on record as favoring no federal educational aid going to Katrina victims rather than having an aid bill allowing educational choice.

The tide turned when Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, the "Lion of Liberalism," and previously a school-choice opponent, joined with fellow Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu of Louisiana in favoring the inclusion of school choice in the Katrina relief bill.

Just as Robert E. Lee is widely revered today by Northerners and Southerners, Kennedy will go down in history for his courage at this pivotal point in history.

Lee led the Confederate army despite privately opposing slavery. And, when the time came to heal the divided nation, Lee rode to Appomattox Court House to sign the surrender documents ending the Civil War. Kennedy, facing the reality of the desperate educational needs of disadvantaged families ravaged by Katrina, threw his support to the educationally deprived poor and minority families he so deeply cares about, and in so doing helped to bring the nation together.

Kennedy's stand mirrored the previous unexpected support for school choice of California's Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, whose advocacy for educational choice in Washington, D.C., was the turning point in the 2004 passage of the school choice program there.

Even without the Katrina relief bill, 2005 saw the passage of two new school-choice programs, in Ohio, for kids trapped in failing public schools, and in Utah, for special-needs children. And, six other school-choice programs were expanded. All told,

2006 will see a 40 percent increase in the numbers of children served by K-12 publicly financed school-choice programs.

In our state, the enormous power of the California Teachers Association has blocked almost all school reform. However, the great shining light here is our charter schools movement, public schools of choice that are locally governed and responsive to parents. We now boast far more charter schools than any other state, 574 at the latest count, and the 212,000 children now in California charter schools represent an 18 percent increase over the previous school year. If California's charter schools continue to grow at that rate, in 17 years more than half of our public school children will be enrolled in schools of choice.

The battle for school choice throughout the nation has been transformed into a bipartisan effort, and the tide has turned. To be sure, obstacles remain, with the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers able to outspend school-choice advocates, 30-1. However, even with the political contributions, elected officials are seeing the success of school choice and the handwriting on the wall and are less-often doing the bidding of the giant teachers unions.

More and more, school choice opponents are becoming isolated into conclaves of those who financially benefit from the public school monopoly. They are repeating the same old intellectually bankrupt arguments, citing the same falsified statistics on rates of dropouts and high school campus violence and the same phony public school per-student spending figures. All this while digging deep into their own pockets to enroll their kids in private schools.

Hurricane Katrina was the ultimate proof that "It's an ill wind that doesn't blow some good." As tragic as that storm was, it did bring a New Year's gift to the children of our nation by blowing into retreat the armies opposing school choice.

Freedom of choice in education is now unstoppable.