

Opinion:

School choice reforms are more vital than ever

*By Alan Bonsteel and Larry Sand
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As we honor National School Choice week beginning Sunday, one fact stands out: 2012 marks the year when there can be no turning back in school choice reforms.

Last July, The Wall Street Journal dubbed 2011 "The Year of School Choice" because of legislation that had been passed all over our nation. For example, North Carolina and Tennessee eliminated caps on charter schools. Maine passed its first charter school law. Twelve states either adopted new voucher programs or expanded existing ones. After first turning its back on the popular D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, Congress reconstituted funding for it.

There is no reason to think that the momentum will slow down in 2012.

Much of this "revolution" began with the 2010 midterm elections, which saw the selection of legislators and governors who believe that school choice is a way to improve education and save precious tax dollars at the same time. Interestingly, what was once almost solely a Republican issue has been joined by some courageous Democrats who have begun to push back against the powerful teachers unions and other organizations like the NAACP.

By challenging these traditional political allies, they have transcended politics and embraced choice as a civil rights issue. Any political partisanship that divides us must remain secondary so that we can devote every ounce of our collective will to quickly prevail in what is without question the most crucial battle of our time.

How can anyone say that kids should be condemned to go to the school down their street, no matter how poorly that school may be functioning and no matter how violent it may be? How can anyone refuse a family that can't afford full tuition to a private school a return of some of their tax dollars to help defray the costs of that private school?

How can anyone deny a parent who chooses to send their child to a charter school that does a better job of educating because it does not have to abide by the onerous union/district contracts that restrict teachers in traditional public schools from doing the best job they can do? Why should a child be forced to go to a public school where there is no accountability for teachers?

Nowhere is lack of school choice more damaging than in our inner cities, where kids are trapped in separate and very unequal public schools that have inflicted high dropout rates on black and Hispanic youths. Many of these families have single-parent households who desperately need to send their children to the best school they can to ensure that the cycle of poverty will not continue. As such, the right to choose the best school for all children is the unfinished mission of the Civil Rights movement.

Despite the fact that public education in many quarters is in catastrophic shape, countries like China and India regularly clean our clocks in international competition. And despite being in the midst of an unemployment crisis, we still have school choice foes - those who are being served by maintaining the status quo - poorly performing teachers, teachers unions, inept school boards, useless bureaucrats, etc. But as time goes on, they will be marginalized as the public comes to realize that education should center on the child, not the adults who are in charge.

School choice is hitting critical mass. However, it is absolutely crucial to the future of our nation that we win as rapidly as possible. Education is an issue that trumps all others, because nothing else that matters can be accomplished if we fail to teach our children well.

Freedom of choice in education is no less precious than the other basic American freedoms we cherish - freedom of speech, religion and assembly. We must prevail quickly so that our great but troubled nation, conceived in liberty, may long endure.

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