

Media Report:

School voucher opposition hypocritical

By Alan Bonsteel

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In back-to-back speeches to the state Democratic convention in San Jose recently, Al Gore and Bill Bradley traded barbs about education. Gore flanked on the stage by Gov. Gray Davis and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin attacked the educational platform of Bradley, who is on record as having voted for school vouchers in the Senate and who supports public school choice and charter schools.

Gore's stance marks him as the only presidential candidate in the two major political parties who still opposes school choice. It also increases his hypocrisy quotient in a campaign year in which "authenticity" has been propelling Bradley and Sen. John McCain to within striking distance of their respective nominations. Gore, after all -- like the other high-profile school choice opponents Bill Clinton, Ted Kennedy and Jesse Jackson -- sent all his own children to private schools.

Gore's comments, however, were

not aimed at the American people, who polls show now favor school choice by a clear majority. Gore was pandering to the teachers unions. In San Jose, California Teachers Association volunteers roamed the corridors passing out leaflets titled "How the Candidates Measure Up on Vouchers," with Gore touted as the only candidate who can be trusted to oppose school choice under any circumstances.

At the last Democratic National Convention in 1996, public schoolteachers composed an astounding 21 percent of all delegates -- votes Gore desperately needs to save his candidacy, weighed down by Clinton fatigue and his own legendary lack of charisma.

And, even if Gore wins the Democratic nomination -- as now seems likely, given the 4-to-1 polling lead in California -- he has already spent most of the \$40 million in campaign funds allotted to him under federal campaign rules. He will thus desperately need the teachers

union phone banks and their quasi-legal "in-kind" donations, such as printing campaign fliers at union expense.

By contrast, his most likely opponent -- George W. Bush -- has refused taxpayer money for his campaign and is thus not limited in fund raising by federal election rules.

Should Gore win the presidency, he will be so beholden to the teachers unions as to be incapable of championing even the most basic educational reforms.

The stakes could hardly be higher. In recent years, only Clinton's veto has kept Congress from passing educational savings accounts, and from allowing residents of the District of Columbia to use vouchers to flee the dysfunctional public schools there.

And almost any major presidential candidate but Gore would be open to converting to low-income vouchers the

Title I funds that were the federal government's original 1965 inroad to K-12 education, and one well-documented to

have been a total failure in helping the impoverished children who are its alleged beneficiaries.

Most importantly, the pro-school-choice side holds a slim 5-to-4 majority on the Supreme Court, with justices on both sides of the issue soon to retire due to age or poor health.

Gore's strategy abandons the traditional Democratic constituencies of African-Americans and Hispanics ? now

the strongest supporters of school choice as a result of being forced into the worst public schools. It is no coincidence that the only serious minority candidate for president, Alan Keyes, is unshakably pro-school choice.

Support for school choice is now nearly universal among Republican political leaders. And, despite the temptation of the teachers unions' awesome money and phone banks, support is growing among

Democratic politicians, who are now well aware that the public school monopoly is just as sclerotic as the old Soviet Union ? and sliding just as inevitably toward the scrap heap of history.

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