

# *The Original School Voucher Plan*

*By*

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On June 6, for the 60th anniversary of D-Day, the world saw an unprecedented show of unity. For the first time, a head of state of Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, attended what will probably be the last major commemoration of an event that may well have saved the world. The implicit message was that even the German people accept that the defeat of Hitler was necessary, and honor the valor of the soldiers who died to preserve freedom in the world. And the coming together of Schroeder along with the leaders of the United States, Britain, and France signaled that the transgressions of Germany in launching World War Two are now forgiven, and that Germany now stands as an equal with the other major powers.

Only a little more than two weeks after D-Day, on June 22, 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt, confident of victory, signed into law the G.I. Bill of Rights. Of the 15 million eligible returning G.I.s, 7 million, or nearly half, attended a college or trade school under the G.I. Bill. As a result, America's college enrollment nearly doubled in the four years following the end of the war. Many ex-G.I.s, eager to get on with their lives, started families while still in school, the beginning of the Baby Boom that is now pushing retirement age.

Ten years ago, for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the G.I. Bill, the whole of America's educators voiced their praise for this historic legislation. What has changed in the meantime, though, is the battle for K-12 school choice. The G.I. Bill was and is, after all, a voucher system allowing full freedom of school choice. Returning G.I.s used it not just to attend religious schools such as Notre Dame and Brandeis, but to study for religious ministries.

In 1994, on that 50th anniversary, the Milwaukee K-12 voucher program was the only one in the nation at that time. It was only three years old and enrolled only a few thousand students. Now, America has five government-funded K-12 voucher programs, the most recently-established in Washington, D.C., under the nose of Congress. This year, will the public education establishment figure out that the G.I. Bill that it once praised to the heavens is precisely the kind of voucher system it vehemently opposes?

Just as the original G.I. Bill sent 250,000 blacks to college, almost all the first in their families, so is the battle for K-12 school choice the civil rights battle of the 21st century. Our current system of compulsory assignment to a public school by residence results in "zip code segregation" that divides us by race and by income.

Worse still, although the U.S. also celebrated this year the 50th anniversary of the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that attempted to outlaw “separate but equal” public schools, the reality is that we now have public schools that are both separate and unequal. Our minorities, and especially our poor minorities, are consistently consigned to public schools in which they are lucky if they graduate without having been victimized by violence, and luckier still if they have learned how to read.

School choice for our K-12 schools has now reached a critical mass in which it is unstoppable. More and more Americans are recognizing that there is nothing that will more unite us than an educational system that allows the poor the same freedom of choice that the wealthy now have, and that gives to all a fair chance to achieve the American dream.

Just as there is now no controversy about the need for the sacrifices of D-Day, or the inestimable value of the G.I. Bill of Rights, or the righteousness of the attempt of the Brown decision to outlaw public school segregation, in fifty years there will be no controversy about the value of K-12 school choice. We will instead feel only bafflement about why the American people tolerated for so long a system of public education that violated our values of freedom of choice and open competition in the marketplace of ideas.

School choice will bring us together.

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