

Opinion:

Parents demand, 'Let our children go'

L.A., Compton districts accused of not allowing transfers mandated by U.S.

By ALAN BONSTEEL, Orange Counter Register, March 24, 2006

How long should parents allow their children to remain trapped in a failed school? Five years? Two years? One year?

To ask the question is to know the answer. Loving, caring parents would drive out to the school, rescue their child and drive home without a glance back.

Appropriately, when Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, it made clear that every child in America has the right to attend an effective school – now. And, based on that law, two organizations that favor school choice filed administrative complaints Thursday against the Los Angeles Unified and Compton Unified school districts. The complaints demand that the districts provide and publicize transfer options to better-performing schools.

One of the groups, Alliance for School Choice, also asked U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to cut off federal funds to the districts until they comply with NCLB. In both districts, the patterns of evasion of the NCLB's school-transfer provisions for families trapped in failed schools have been blatant, clearly intentional and the numbers of children allowed to transfer tiny.

In Los Angeles and Compton, test scores are in the dumps, many campuses are plagued by violence, and roughly half the students are dropping out before finishing high school. No one voluntarily enrolls a child in these districts - the kids are there because the schools in these districts are prisons for families who don't have the money for anything else. The families in these districts are overwhelmingly poor and minority, and the huge, uncaring bureaucracies running the districts are exploiting these impoverished minority families who have no place else to go.

While both districts are heavily racially segregated, Compton, which is nearly 100 percent minorities, especially has educational apartheid. In 1963, it was Alabama Gov. George Wallace who stood in the schoolhouse door to block racial integration. Today, it is educrats and teachers union bosses in places like Los Angeles Unified and Compton who block the escape of disadvantaged minorities to a better life.

In both districts, the numbers of children trapped in failing schools so overwhelmingly outnumber the available openings in high-performing district public schools that simply

allowing transfers within the districts can never solve the problem. What will be necessary is some combination of allowing transfers to high-performing public schools outside the districts; allowing existing public schools within the districts to convert to charter schools; and giving students in dysfunctional public schools scholarships to attend private schools.

These options have been shown to produce higher test scores at the same or even lower per-student spending rates, and the prod of competition has been demonstrated to dramatically improve the existing traditional public schools.

Of those three options, allowing public schools to convert to charter status will probably work most quickly and help the greatest numbers of students. Charter schools are public schools of choice that are run directly by their local communities and that bypass the stifling bureaucracy of traditional public schools by putting the money directly into the classroom. California's existing charter schools now enroll about 3 percent of our public school students and have been the one shining light in a state notorious for its terrible public schools.

The option of private school scholarships now has precedent in federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which has long given children with disabilities who cannot be adequately served in public schools a scholarship to a private special-education school. The Hurricane Katrina education relief bill, passed in December 2005, also offers displaced families scholarships to private schools.

Whichever of the options are implemented, the time to act is now. When Congress passed No Child Left Behind and said that all children have a right to an education, it made clear that it meant today, not the someday of the educrats' daydreams. We do not have a moment to spare in rescuing those children who so desperately need our help.