

Op-Ed:

Revolution in U.S. education is in California

by Alan Bonsteel

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The greatest revolution in education in the United States today is taking place in Los Angeles. It is the mandate of the Los Angeles Unified School District School Board to convert almost a third of its schools either to charter schools, the public schools of choice that are the one shining light in an otherwise dysfunctional system, or other alternatives such as magnet schools. The change is not only a mighty one for the state's largest school district, but in time it could double the number of public schools of choice in California.

What is remarkable is not just the magnitude of this earth-shaking change, but the complete shift of the paradigm about how we think about public education. The driving force behind this revolution is Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who is not only a Democrat but also a former organizer for the United Teachers of Los Angeles, Los Angeles teachers' union. Villaraigosa took his nontraditional stand because, as he noted, LAUSD was racked with violence and plagued with a dropout rate of 50 percent, and showed no signs of improving.

Even more astounding: With the doors open to making bids to the school board to launch pioneering schools, groups of public school teachers and the teachers' unions themselves are submitting proposals. "This is the power that teachers have always been asking for, the authority to choose what is happening in our schools," Monterey Park English teacher Patricia Jauregui told the Los Angeles Times. She added, "With power comes responsibility. We are accountable for the results, and I don't mind that."

In his 1978 book, "Education by Choice," John Coons, UC Berkeley School of Law professor and father of the American charter school movement, predicted that one day public school teachers would see the benefit of teaching in schools in which they had professional autonomy, and in which every child wanted to be there and valued what that school had to offer. It has taken 32 years for that prediction to come to pass.

California public schools, once the envy of the nation, have students performing on some tests of reading skills barely above Mississippi students. Our once-vaunted high technology sector must import engineers from Asia. And our state budget has been busted in large part because of a bulging prison system, with more than 85 percent of the convicts high school dropouts.

At the state level too, school choice has become a far more bipartisan issue than could have been imagined even a year ago. Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg and his colleague Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, teamed up to get legislation passed that mandates more complete reporting of dropout rates.

Four of the candidates for governor of California, Republicans and Democrats both, are charter school advocates.

This is public education's fall of the Berlin Wall. The old model of the compulsory, one-size-fits-all, factory-style public school is being tossed on the scrap heap of history, to be replaced by upholding the U.N. Charter of Universal Human Rights, which guarantees the right of parents to direct the education of their children.

Someday soon, all of our children will be enrolled in schools that their families have freely chosen and that give them the sense of community, even of family, that will keep them in school and get them safely to graduation day.