

## *Editorial*

# *"Parents deserve a better option than an inept public education system "*

*By*

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Within the next three years, California voters will be asked to vote on a school choice initiative involving both vouchers for private schools and funding for Charter Schools – independent public schools of choice– and Los Angeles parents will play a role in that battle.

The public thinks spending on education has declined since the passage of Proposition 13. But that's just not the case. In fact, per student spending in constant dollars climbed 17 percent from 1978 to 1997, and is now at the highest level ever.

Despite record spending, educational results are dismal. Unbelievably, with the budget of \$7.1 billion for 695,000 students, LAUSD spends an astounding \$10,200 per student – enough to send every child to an expensive private school, transported in a chauffeured limousine. Even with record sums of money going into education, California faces a staggering dropout rate. California enrolled 420,643 high school freshmen in 1994 and graduated 282,897 seniors in 1998, for a dropout rate of 32.7 percent not counting an upward adjustment for our rapid K-12 population growth.

Once again, LAUSD takes the booby prize, with a dropout rate of 46.7 percent. Among the special interest groups opposing school choice are the shadow government of our public schools –the California Teachers Association, the California Federation of Teachers, and the California School Employees Association. Our governor, Gray Davis, has accepted millions in campaign donations from these unions, and so has our state Superintendent of Instruction, Delaine Eastin.

In all of the 10 largest districts in California, and in most of the smaller districts, the school employees' unions control the school boards. Such was

the case in Los Angeles until a slate of reform candidates bankrolled by Mayor Richard Riordan gained control of the LAUSD board.

Our public schools have proved to be inept at proving new classroom space at reasonable cost, with LAUSD once again the biggest loser. Even if the district hadn't started building the new Belmont Learning Center on an old oil field venting methane gas that threatens to ignite in a giant fireball, the school would still have cost an amazing \$50,000 per student –about what private schools spend to build and equip an entire classroom.

On the other side of the school choice battle will be the host of parents, community leaders and taxpayers disheartened and angered by the disastrous performance of California's public schools.

Most notably, community leaders from Compton, where the school district was taken over by the California Department of Education in 1993 because of bankruptcy and mismanagement, have witnessed a continued deterioration of what was already an educational disaster.

For good reason these community leaders are asking why the state should dictate policy to the other 997 districts when it can't run even a moderate-size district.

Many are asking, as well, why Compton residents can't have access to their fair share of educational tax dollars, so they can choose for themselves the best education for their children.

School choice advocates will point to the good news of the performance of voucher programs around the country. In Milwaukee and Cleveland, for example, we have seen improved test scores, decreased dropout rates, decreased violence, and dramatically improved family satisfaction –all on far less money per student than the local public schools are spending.

Florida has just passed the first statewide school choice plan. And favorable results are now pouring in on the 46 privately funded school choice programs throughout the nation –including the Walton-Forstmann program in Los Angeles, which attracted applications from a stunning percentage of low-income LAUSD families.

What drives school choice advocates is the shining ideal of a system in which each child is an individual, each with needs that must be met, and each with special gifts that deserve to be nurtured.

We believe that the single mother who empties the wastebasket at night has the same right to quality schooling for her children, the same right to direct their education, as does the big shot in a penthouse office.

In the balloting for school vouchers, the choice will be a stark one: between a new and dynamic system that empowers families with the freedom of Choice to best serve their own children, and an intellectually and morally bankrupt monopoly that is in meltdown. The people of Los Angeles, and throughout the state, deserve the better option.