

SPENDING VERSUS CHOICE IN THE HOUSE EDUCATION DEBATE

This week the House of Representatives will consider the Equity and Excellence in Education Act of 1990 (H.R. 5115), an omnibus bill which authorizes a record \$1 billion for new education programs. Unfortunately, the measure reflects the discredited notion that increased spending will boost student performance. Representatives Steve Bartlett, the Texas Republican, and Dennis Eckart, the Ohio Democrat, intend to offer an amendment to the bill, the Access to Education Act (H.R. 3697). In contrast to the omnibus bill, the Bartlett-Eckart legislation recognizes that school choice is the key to improving performance, and reflects the growing support across the country for educational choice and for streamlining school bureaucracies. The Bartlett-Eckart legislation, and its Senate companion bill (S. 2121), sponsored by Dan Coats, the Indiana Republican, deserve careful consideration by Congress.

The omnibus bill is a package of new spending programs that received little support in Congress when they were considered individually. The bill's chief sponsor, Augustus Hawkins, the California Democrat, evidently is hoping that the synergistic effect of combining the measures will yield greater political support. The bill expands literacy programs, creates teacher development academies, and provides funds for teacher training. The Bush Administration is expected to support the costly measure because it contains some elements of the President's education package, sent to Congress last February, such as a new program that will offer financial rewards to schools that score successes in educating disadvantaged students.

The omnibus bill faced stiff opposition in the House Education and Labor Committee, where critics concerned with the budget deficit objected to such an expensive initiative. Opponents also note that total spending on public education has increased 31 percent since 1982, while student achievement steadily declined. In addition, an abundance of research suggests strongly that more spending is not the answer to the decline in American education and that, as Bartlett and Eckart contend, Congress should focus on reforming the bureaucratic structure of public schools.

Autonomy, Choice Needed. According to a major new study published by the liberal Brookings Institution, for instance, the organizational structure of the current public school system is a key roadblock to reform. The authors of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, Brookings Senior Fellow John Chubb and Stanford University Political Science Professor Terry Moe, show that past reform efforts relying on government solutions have been unsuccessful because government itself is the problem. The authors conclude that competition among all schools — public and private — will improve education. "Like many observers of contemporary American education," they write, "we believe that the bureaucratization of educational governance and administration has simply gone too far...." What is needed, say Chubb and Moe, is "a new system of public education, one that is built upon school autonomy and parent-student choice rather than direct democratic control and bureaucracy." Supporters of choice, like the Brookings authors, maintain that parental choice and competition would provide strong incentives for schools to become effective.

Those lawmakers in Congress who support higher education spending and oppose efforts to expand choice clearly are out of touch with state lawmakers of both parties, who in increasing numbers are embracing education choice. Eight states already have adopted open-enrollment plans that allow parents to send their children to virtually any public school in their state. Moreover, 76 percent of all parents whose children are in public schools support choice, with black parents favoring the right to choose in even larger numbers than white parents. And earlier this year, low-income minority parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, won the right to choose which public or private non-sectarian school they wish their children to attend, with the school district helping to defray the tuition costs of a private school. The Milwaukee plan was spearheaded by Representative Annette "Polly" Williams, a black state legislator and self-proclaimed liberal, who argues that minorities deserve the same choices that more affluent Americans have always had. Citing the failure of the current system to educate her constituents, Williams believes that choice can provide true educational opportunities for minorities.

The National Governors Association also endorses choice, and governors in Nebraska and Ohio have been instrumental in creating statewide choice plans. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second largest teachers' union, identifies public school choice as an essential reform. Complains Shanker: "we have a Soviet system of education in this country." A growing number of school administrators also believe choice is the key to school reform, including the Superintendent of Milwaukee's schools and East Harlem District 4 former Superintendent Sy Fliegel, who explains that the district's 1974 choice plan raised student performance significantly. Detroit School Board President Lawrence Patrick also is backing choice in behalf of his city's low-income students. Meanwhile, in the face of this growing support for choice in the states, the omnibus federal education bill ignores choice and increases spending.

Eliminating Barriers. The Bartlett-Eckart bill, by contrast, would eliminate many federal barriers to state or local school district choice plans. For example, the bill would allow federal Chapter 1 funds, used for disadvantaged children, to "follow" a child to the school of choice at the option of the local school districts. At present this assistance is given to a school and cannot be transferred. The Bartlett-Eckart bill also provides \$39 million to states and local school districts to develop open-enrollment policies and procedures. Funds could be used to help support outreach programs, for parent information networks to ensure that all parents are fully informed about their choices, and for program evaluations. School districts currently encounter difficulty instituting open-enrollment plans because of the initial costs involved and the spending restrictions on state education funds. This discretionary money would support state-based initiatives.

More and more states are embracing choice and rejecting discredited spending programs like those embodied in the Hawkins omnibus bill. The Bartlett-Eckart bill addresses the real problem — not inadequate federal spending but the public school monopoly. Its sponsors provide Congress with the opportunity to empower parents, not bureaucrats. Over fifteen state legislatures are scheduled to consider choice plans in their next session and Bartlett-Eckart would help districts to launch such plans. From Cambridge, Massachusetts to East Harlem, New York, and from New Jersey to Washington State, choice is giving equal access to a quality education to thousands of students. Choice has resulted in reduced dropout rates, higher achievement scores, and improved student and teacher morale. There is no evidence that programs such as those in Representative Hawkins's bill will have similar results.

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