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Why poor students are stuck in bad schools

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Some Illinois House Republicans had an opportunity to give 30,000 poor, black children stuck in some of the worst, most overcrowded Chicago public schools a chance for a better education. But when it came to the moment of truth, they tossed the kids overboard.

Those same Republicans could have participated in one of the most remarkable bipartisan legislative efforts in memory, but they chose to side with the teachers unions and the hundreds of thousands of dollars they have been showering on GOP candidates around the state for years in the hopes of killing school vouchers.

Those Republicans last week helped defeat legislation that would have given students in the 50 worst Chicago public elementary schools \$3,700 a year to attend private schools. It would have become the nation's largest school-voucher pilot program. Enactment was looking good after courageous

Democrats in the Senate, led by Sen. James Meeks, D-Chicago, joined GOP senators to overwhelmingly pass the legislation.

Then the bill went to the House, where 22 Republicans got out their knives.

Wait, you're asking, aren't school vouchers a Republican/conservative/ libertarian core belief? You'd expect Democrats to kill it — and certainly many did their part — but why would Republicans join in execution?

The usual explanation is tempting.

Leading the House GOP opposition was one Rep. Roger Eddy, a double dipper from downstate Hutsonville. According to a Family Taxpayers Foundation database, Eddy gets \$90,000 as a school superintendent, and his wife, Rebecca, a teacher in one of his schools, earns \$40,000. That's in addition to the \$68,880 plus per diem he receives as a state legislator.

Wait, there's more.

According to the Illinois State Board of Elections, state teachers unions have given him \$79,182 over nine years in campaign contributions, including \$7,750 from the Chicago Teachers Union. You fill in the blanks about why Chicago teachers would be working for the election of a Republican from a town that's a four-hour drive away.

Closer to home, GOP Rep. Rosemary Mulligan of Des Plaines, another voucher opponent, has received \$91,482 over 17 years from teachers unions. Of course, when she spelled out the reasons for her nay vote on the House floor, she didn't mention the contributions. In fact, her explanation was so muddled and unpersuasive that I felt embarrassed for her. Stumbling through a web of non sequiturs, she talked about how all kids deserve a public education. Yes, and so? Does that mean they all must be confined to Chicago public schools?

Some other GOP "no" votes and their teachers union contributions: Rich Brauer, Springfield, \$11,400; Renee Kosel, Mokena, \$119,371; Bill Mitchell, Decatur, \$19,830; Jerry Mitchell, Rock Falls, \$130,245; Donald Moffitt, Galesburg, \$111,125; Sandra Pihos, Glen Ellyn, \$5,700; Raymond Poe, Springfield, \$55,561; Dennis Reboletti, Addison, \$22,250; David Reis, Olney, \$7,750; and Chapin Rose, Charleston, \$14,602.

Not that I would suggest that the teachers unions bought their votes, although that's the usual script of liberal campaign-finance reformers. No doubt others, such as GOP Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano of Elmwood Park — known to play footsies with Chicago Democrats — had their own reasons. But the usual excuses offered on the floor — that vouchers will destroy public schools, don't work and are unconstitutional — are in dispute if not flat wrong.

House Minority Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, and Rep. Kevin Joyce, D-Chicago, deserve immense credit for attempting to gather the 30 votes from each party needed to pass the legislation.

Gov. Pat Quinn deserves discredit for keeping his mouth shut while rumors circulated that he would veto the bill. Every Republican and Democrat who voted for the bill in the face of sure retaliation from the Chicago Teachers Union, Illinois Federation of Teachers and Illinois Education Association gets credit for the courage of putting children above politics.

Meeks, a liberal who has supported an income tax increase, deserves credit for putting together this extraordinary coalition against the traditional opposition of Democrats and liberals against vouchers.

But the Republicans who voted against the bill can give up any pretense that they give a damn about disadvantaged and minority Chicago kids. And the liberals and Democrats who voted against the bill? Their claim of being "progressive" has been demolished. I wonder how they feel about aligning themselves with anti-change and stone-hearted Republicans.

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