

Cal Thomas: A crack in the school-choice dike?

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Few organizations are as consistently liberal as the Anti-Defamation League, especially when it comes to matters of church and state. The ADL devotes an entire page on its Web site (adl.org) to church-state separation and wants the "wall" between the two to remain as high and impenetrable as possible, believing that to lower it would have a negative effect on both.

Which makes it remarkable that the executive committee of ADL's Philadelphia chapter has voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution endorsing vouchers that would allow children in underperforming schools in poor neighborhoods to escape to schools that would give them a safer environment in which to learn and, thus, a better education.

John Kramer, vice president for communications at the Institute for Justice (ij.org), tells me the ADL's 30 regional offices are considering whether to adopt the Philadelphia resolution. The ADL's national board has scheduled a vote for June 14.

Reading the Philadelphia resolution recalls the arguments made for years by voucher advocates. It says a good education is a civil right protected by the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal treatment under the law. In a letter from the executive committee to Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, the committee maintains that, "Allowing for school choice is the best remedy for our failing system of education." That is especially true for the Philadelphia public school system, which the state took over in 2001.

Attempts to improve public schools by having them compete for students with a choice as to which educational institution they will attend -- in Philadelphia and elsewhere -- have been faced with consistent opposition from teachers unions and Democratic politicians who care more about patronage and union contributions than the overall welfare of children.

The Philadelphia ADL letter reads like a legal argument with mounds of facts in support of its position. It says, "The evidence that our public education system is failing to educate our children is staggering ... high rates of illiteracy, an unacceptable number of high school dropouts and the widening achievement gap between white and minority students merely scratch the surface."

The letter backs up what conservatives have been saying for years: "Despite dramatically increasing the amount of money spent on K-12 education over the past several decades --

per pupil expenditures have increased by 53.6 percent (after adjusting for inflation) -- student performance is abysmal."

Read that again: "student performance is abysmal." Not flat, or slowly improving, but abysmal!

Addressing what it says is a "common myth that school-voucher programs drain financial resources, as well as the best and brightest students from public schools," the letter says, "the evidence proves otherwise. Research on voucher programs' effects on the finances of public schools shows that these programs actually save money at both the state and local level. Furthermore, as a recent study by the [liberal] Brookings Institution indicates, these programs do not 'cream' the best students from the public school system."

The ADL letter says nine major studies on the systemic effects of vouchers on public schools found positive effects on public schools: "... school-choice programs complement public education by spurring the public system, as a result of competition, to perform better. No study has found that school choice makes public schools worse."

Liberals have been on the wrong side of this issue for years. Conservatives have demonstrated their superior "compassion" by favoring vouchers that would allow poor children the best chance to climb out of poverty and not repeat their parents' mistakes. If Republicans can't win with this issue by attracting more minority voters with children in failing schools, they don't deserve to remain a viable political party.

The June 14 vote by the National ADL board has nothing to do with church and state. It has to do with whether the minds of minority children will be wasted, or nourished in a way that will allow them to make something of themselves. That ought not be a political issue. It should be a moral issue for the ADL and everyone else.

In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled a Cleveland voucher program constitutional. What's keeping vouchers from spreading across the nation? Politicians who have agendas other than a child's welfare. Liberty began in Philadelphia. Maybe it has begun anew.