

Opinion

Larry Sand: Students benefit from school vouchers



By LARRY SAND / Contributing Writer

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As we celebrate National School Choice Week, it's worth noting that over 5 million students across the country are recipients of [Pell Grants](#).

Named after Rhode Island Sen. Claiborne Pell, the law's sponsor, they were originally called "Basic Educational Opportunity [Grants](#)." Their purpose is to give up to \$5,645 in federal funds per year to students who otherwise could not afford college.

The grants or vouchers, which can be used at any one of 5,400 post-secondary institutions, provided assistance to some 9.4 million students in 2011-2012, with awards totaling \$33.6 billion.

Worth noting is the report for the 2010-2011 school year which claims, "seven of the top 10 colleges by total [Pell Grant](#) money awarded were for-profit institutions."

These grants are popular and have had Congressional support for many years. Moreover, they have the hardy approval of the nation's teachers unions.

In fact, just last year American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten excoriated Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wisc., for submitting a budget that would freeze the grants at their current level.

But when it comes to setting aside public funds for K-12 students to be educated in a private setting, the teachers unions sing a very different tune.

A National Education Association policy brief reads, "Vouchers aren't a strategy for improving the public schools; they are a strategy of abandonment that would leave America's children behind. The battle over vouchers diverts time, energy and resources from real school improvement."

And NEA backs up its tough talk. In 2009, its president, Dennis Van Roekel, wrote a threatening letter to every Democratic member of Congress declaring that the union opposed any extension of the popular D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, and would be watching them very carefully.

He added, “Vouchers are not real education reform. [...] Opposition to vouchers is a top priority for NEA.”

Randi Weingarten is just as hostile to K-12 vouchers. During Mitt Romney’s run for president in 2012, she stated that instead of looking to improve education for all children, “[Romney] parroted failed voucher and privatization schemes that have not improved student learning.”

Weingarten’s characterization of school choice through vouchers as “failed” is erroneous. These subsidies have not only improved education for the students who attend the schools of choice, but study after study has shown that kids who remain in public school also benefit when a voucher system is instituted and schools are forced to compete for students.

The Friedman Foundation reports that where voucher and other types of privatization options are in play, school choice improves student outcomes for just about all kids. Further, no empirical study has found a negative output.

So why is it okay to give funds to late teens to attend a private college, but not to 8, 12 and 16 year olds to enroll in a private elementary, middle or high school?

The principle is either sound or it’s not.

Obviously unions are threatened by vouchers on a K-12 level because that’s where their primary source of funding is. Not nearly as many college instructors and professors elect to pay union dues.

Larry Sand, a former classroom teacher, is president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network.