

Opinion

Bonsteel & Sand: The importance of school vouchers

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Those in favor of preserving the education status quo at any cost – the teachers unions, legislators backed by those unions, educrats, et al – would have us believe that families using some public funding to send their children to a private school is a plot by greedy corporations to privatize education for the purposes of getting rich. In fact, study after study has shown that the people who really benefit from this kind of school choice are low-income minority students.

The latest research – scheduled for publication in the Journal of Public Economics, the results of which were released online this month – showed that over a 17-year period, low-income minority students who had participated in the New York City voucher program were 10 percent more likely to enroll in college and 35 percent more likely than their peers – who applied but lost out in a lottery – to obtain a bachelor's degree.

The same crowd that screams that school choice is a corporate plot also claims that vouchers are costly. Actually, the reverse is true. In September, a Friedman Foundation report that examined 10 voucher programs found that total savings of at least \$1.7 billion were realized since 1990-91.

In fact, the first K-12 voucher program in the U.S. was not brought to us by corporate interests but by Polly Williams, a Democratic African American member of the Wisconsin Legislature and, before that, a welfare mother of four. Her troops were mostly mothers on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, many of them without a dollar to spare.

Joining forces with Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson, the Wisconsin Legislature passed the nation's first modern school voucher program in 1989, targeting students from low-income households in the Milwaukee School District.

The public education establishment immediately sued. But with the help of school choice pioneer and attorney Clint Bolick, Polly Williams prevailed.

Polly Williams died last Nov. 9, at that point the longest-running member of the Wisconsin Legislature. She was a real hero to the school choice movement that will remember her forever, and a great benefactor of struggling families everywhere.

According to the latest data, over two dozen voucher programs exist in 14 states and D.C., serving over 100,000 students. But California, which is scraping the bottom academically, has no such program. It's time that a latter-day Sacramento version of Polly Williams steps up to the plate and rallies legislators and the governor to serve all the people who put them in office. So-called "corporate reform" is a meaningless shibboleth to distract us from the real issue: giving all children a fair shot at a decent education.

Alan Bonsteel is president of California Parents for Educational Choice. Larry Sand, a retired teacher, is president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network. National School Choice Week begins Sunday, Jan. 25.