

Status Quo Sentinels Can't Block Choice

Charles A. Byrne

Charles A. Byrne represents District 11 on the Ohio School Board.

Three years ago, at a rally against school vouchers—the foundation upon which the school-choice movement rests—a powerful black leader issued an unfortunate rallying cry for a badly ailing public-education system. “We’re in a fight,” U. S. Congressman Louis Stokes said.

If you let school vouchers happen here, it can happen anywhere else in the nation. The whole nation is watching us to see if we allow it.

Some might find it bitterly ironic that Congressman Stokes, for thirty years a leading national voice on the issue of affirmative action and the rights of African-Americans, chose to defend a system so manifestly in need of fundamental repair. In Cleveland, a town over which his late brother Carl once proudly presided as the nation’s first big-city urban black mayor, the entrenched educational oligarchies have made a thorough mess of things. So bad had things become, in fact, that the state was forced to assume responsibility for the system after a federal judge ordered it into receivership, placing the futures of more than 70,000 children in jeopardy.

And yet, for these sentinels of the status quo, the enemy seems not to be teachers’ unions resistant to reform or do-nothing administrators who drain resources from the classroom. Instead, by opposing vouchers and other features of the school choice movement, they turn their fire on parents who simply choose to exert competitive pressure on badly performing schools by exercising to vote with their feet. And by giving the back of their hands to school choice, these leaders fail to faithfully represent their constituents, since school choice is supported by 86.5 percent of blacks of the child bearing age of 26-35, so stated David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in the *New York Times* recently. As *New York Times* editorial writer Brent Staples recently put it,

These numbers spell trouble for the Democrats, who have been trying to persuade African-American’s to keep the faith with schools that destroy their children’s futures.

As a member of Ohio’s elected school board, I have watched with growing agitation how demagogues of every stripe have used our children as pawns in this tiresome game of protect our goodies. But I also take heart from the abundant signs

that we have at last turned the corner to reform. Slowly, school choice has become an almost irresistible national tide.

Everywhere, defenders of the old system are on the run. Ohio and Wisconsin have taken the lead in pressing for school choice by authorizing the use of vouchers, which in Ohio can be used for both private and parochial schools. Vouchers are nothing more than portable tax dollars which allow parents to direct their education spending where it will have the greatest return. Naturally, it is those underperforming schools and the people who are responsible for them that have screamed the loudest about any method of reform which would hold them accountable.

While I believe Congressman Stokes was misinformed when he spoke out against vouchers that day, he was right about one important thing. The entire nation is indeed watching our Ohio experiment in school choice and parental empowerment, as well as the one in Wisconsin. These states have been in the forefront of the reform effort, either because their situation was worse or their governors were more willing to take the criticism (or perhaps both), but many others will quickly become emboldened by their successes. Parental educational choice is an historical movement destined to succeed, powered by the same moral imperatives that made the civil rights movement's success inevitable. By not choosing to rule on the Wisconsin case, the Supreme court yields to the Wisconsin appeals court's favorable decision and strengthens parents' rights in education.

School choice is an authentic grassroots movement which neither the courts nor the Constitution can deny, because school choice is an affirmative action and civil rights issue for the new millennium. Ω