FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

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TUITION TAX CREDITS

Few issues show the difference between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale so dramatically as education. Mondale wants to tax everybody an additional $11 billion so that the Federal Government can spend more on schools, whereas Reagan wants tax relief to enable parents to choose nonpublic schools for their children.

Almost everybody is dissatisfied with the results of public education today. Parents have many legitimate complaints: the decline in basic skills, the failure of discipline, and the use of controversial subject matter and experimental teaching methods in place of basic education and tried-and-proven methods.

There is no evidence that increasing federal spending will bring about quality education. Indeed, it looks like education quality correlates inversely to federal spending increases.

In trying to remedy the situation, we face two significant power blocs: (1) the government bureaucracy that has a vested interest in serving as a conduit for public school dollars in a monopoly school system, and (2) the National Education Association (NEA) which has become a special-interest political movement more interested in implementing its liberal agenda (such as defense cutbacks and domestic handouts) and in electing liberal candidates than in improving the quality of education.

It is obvious why the education bureaucracy and the NEA prefer the Mondale approach. Whereas tuition tax credits would go directly to the benefit of the children without any "cut" by the bureaucracy, money flowing through the hands of bureaucrats sticks to their fingers by providing teacher jobs, grant money, and power.

The Department of Education regularly doles out money to a long list of liberal grantees. The Federal Government provides only about 10% of local school funding, but imposes about 40% of the regulations.

It is common knowledge that President Carter created the Department of Education as a payoff for NEA support in the election of 1976. In the 1980 campaign, 800 Education

Department employees worked full time for Carter's reelection.

These two power blocs include thousands of people who can lobby for their spending goals on the taxpayers' money, whereas those who seek genuine reforms, such as merit pay for teachers and the testing of teachers, must finance their own lobbying. As a result, any attempt to bring about accountability in public schools has become nearly impossible.

Tuition tax credits would circumvent both these power monsters. They give parents an alternative, so the public schools will have to shape up and turn out a better product in order to meet the competition. The chief value of tuition tax credits for private schools would be to stimulate improvement in public education.

What makes the automobile companies build better cars? The competition factor. If GM cars aren't good enough, they lose customers to Ford and Chrysler. Competition does far more to improve quality than any budget increase.

The tuition tax credit bill supported by the Administration would enable a parent to claim an income tax credit for one-half the tuition paid to send a child to elementary or secondary private school. The amount of the credit would be limited to $100 in 1983, $300 in 1984, and $500 in 1985, and the credit would be phased out for upper-income taxpayers.

Faced with mounting federal deficits, how could President Reagan or conservatives contemplate losing more tax revenue by granting a new tax credit whose price tag is $800 million? Well, compared to Mondale's $11 billion outlay, the $800 million would be a bargain. And considering the fact that we already have 23 million adult illiterates, the cost of NOT beefing up our public schools could be more than $800 million.

The principal argument against tuition tax credits is that the beneficiaries would be only those who attend private schools. On the contrary, it is likely that the principal beneficiaries would be those who attend public schools. When an element of competition is added to the educational system, when private schools become an alternative to which more students can escape, we would witness a real push to improve the quality of public schools.

Tuition tax credits would improve education by bypassing the existing establishment in the Federal Government and the NEA. This is a comparatively inexpensive way to solve problems which have proved otherwise insoluble.