from Phyllis Schlafly

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Bush's New Choice Initiative

The most welcome yet controversial feature of President Bush's long-awaited education initiative is summed up in the word choice. In this century in America, children have been pawns in a monopoly system in which they must attend the school designated by the bureaucrats if they want to use tax dollars.

Since American parents have always had the opportunity to choose non-government schooling for their children by paying double (first in taxes for tax-funded schools and second for tuition to private schools), when we talk about school choice today, we mean letting parents designate where their children use their education dollars.

Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander argues for real choice, saying that "dollars will follow the child," and that "telling parents where they must send their children to school is an alien idea in America." Indeed it is; we don't require foodstamp recipients to spend their coupons in a designated government food store, or require medicare recipients to be treated by a designated government physician.

The Bush initiative would be a small start toward. restoring freedom of choice to education. It calls for $230 million to fund locally devised programs to allow parents to choose public, private or religious schools; that's less than one percent of the $27.1 billion federal education budget.

We don't know how a real choice system would operate since each of the 50 states would have to pass its own version. But let's list some of the different varieties of choice that, parents are seeking today.

(1) Choice to attend any public school in the same district.

(2) Choice to attend any public school in the state. Eight states and many individual school districts allow some form of choice among public schools, but there is little choice of curriculum.

(3) Choice to attend a public school that teaches children to read by the phonics method and teaches other traditional skills, subjects, and discipline. Only a handful of districts with such a school exist, but in those districts parents camp out overnight for days to be in line to enroll their children for the limited spaces available.

(4) Choice to attend any public or private school. Milwaukee is the only area that allows this, and the teachers' unions are fighting it all the way. However, only low-income families are allowed to exercise this choice.

(5) Choice to attend any public, private or religious school. No state in the country allows students to use taxpayer funds to enroll in a religious school.

(6) Choice for high school juniors and seniors to complete high school at a community college. Only Minnesota permits such transfers.

(7) Choice to-homeschool. Only one district (in California) is known to have a plan that allows some public money to go to homeschoolers.

(8) Choice to homeschool combined with attending selected courses or activities in a public or private school, such as math, science, football, or band. Only Washington State allows such partial enrollment in public schools.

Although Bush and Alexander talk vaguely about extending choice to private schools, the booklet called "America 2000: An Education Strategy," distributed at the White House in connection with the President's speech, states: "such choices should include all schools that serve the public and are accountable to public authority, regardless of who runs them." To require successful private and religious schools to be "accountable" to the same public authorities that are running the failed public schools would be to destroy the whole reason for private schools, and would be a fraudulent definition of choice.

This booklet further cautions, "Choice will apply to all schools except where the courts find a constitutional bar." That language sounds like an invitation to the courts to prevent allowing parents to choose religious schools, thereby enabling the Administration and Congress to avoid the blame for such discrimination.

The Bush-Alexander plan places much emphasis on making schools "more accountable." The only kind of accountability that can have any meaning is accountability to parents and, since parents can hardly run the schools themselves,

being accountable means empowering parents to take their children out of one school and put them in another. Accountability is a fraud if it means one group of tax-salaried education bureaucrats reporting to another bunch of tax-salaried education bureaucrats.

It's too bad that the Bush-Alexander initiative fails to address the fundamental education problem -- that 25 million adults who have been through the public schools are illiterate and that another 25 million adults read too poorly to realize the American dream.