from Phyllis Schlafly

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Moving Forward with Choice in Education

President Bush has been encouraging business to get involved in education. The recent news that SAT scores dropped for the fourth straight year, and that verbal scores are now the lowest they have ever been, is only one more proof (if any were needed) that innovative ideas are desperately needed.

Apparently the public school establishment expected business involvement to consist principally of writing checks while the same teachers unions would have the joy of spending an influx of new funds. On the other hand, sometimes tax dollars flow from the schools to businesses -- that is, to the businesses which have figured out how to make profits by selling psychological curricula, teacher workshops, or television commercials to the schools.

J. Patrick Rooney, CEO of Golden Rule Insurance Co., responded to the challenge in a different way. He took President Bush's words about school choice seriously: he set up a $1.2 million Choice Charitable Trust to award scholarships to 500 low-income students in Indianapolis.

Each student will receive a voucher to pay up to 50 percent (capped at $800) of the tuition at any Indianapolis private school. Most private schools in the area charge less than $l,600 a year, whereas the public schools spend an average of $4,000 per pupil.

Within three days after Go1den Rulers announcement, the company had received 1,076 applications. Golden Rule has expanded the program to take 686 students, invited other local corporations to participate (Eli Lilly has indicated it may), and put other applicants on a waiting list.

The public-school establishment, however, is unhappy about this project to help minority children. The 47,000-student Indianapolis public school district feels threatened by the impending departure of 686 poor students and has been busy rallying its friends to attack the Golden Rule plan.

One group called it “disastrous” that the $1.2 million will not be just given outright to the public schools. Another is urging parents to refuse the grants. A third group charges that the Golden Rule project will “undermine” public education.

Getting down to the real motive for the outcry, Indianapolis school superintendent Shirl E. Gilbert 2nd complained that the loss of 250 students would cost the district $1 million in state aid. That's good news for taxpayers, but it brings anguished yelps from the public-school monopoly that has built its empire on a headcount of bodies inside the public-school buildings.

A newspaper voice for the public-school monopoly leaked out another reason for the objection to the Golden Rule plan. “What makes Go1den Rulers plan controversial,” Education Week reported, is the fact that it is “couched in the rhetoric of parental choice.” That runs counter to the liberal programs which are based on the elitist notion that mere citizens, taxpayers and parents really don’t know how to make their own decisions and spend their own money, and therefore tax-salaried functionaries (usually self-identified as “experts”) should do these things for them.

The school establishment’s reaction to the Golden Rule plan is similar to the public school-generated flap against the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which is now into its second year, with 554 pupils participating, Known as the Polly Williams plan (after the black state representative who sponsored the legislation), up to one percent of low-income Milwaukee public school students are allowed to attend private, nonsectarian schools, each with a $2,500 voucher from state tax funds.

State Representative Polly Williams said that the black groups opposing the Golden Rule plan are “speaking with a forked tongue.” Putting her finger on the problem, she said that those who claim they represent black groups really base their objections on the false premise that poor and minority parents cannot decide for themselves what is best for their children.

The Bush choice-in-education proposal started out as a plan to offer choice among a limited number of public schools, all offering the same curriculum, and differing principally in location. But choice in education is an idea whose time has come; it’s a steam engine rolling downhill and taking many varieties, and there may be no way for the teachers' union monopoly to put the genie back in the bottle.

Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander is now espousing the once-heretical notion that “parents should have the ultimate say in how their children are taught.” In a recent letter, he said: “There is no reason in our free country that parents should be told which school their children will attend and which values in which they will be steeped, any more than they are told where to live, what church to attend, what car to buy, or whom to marry.”

Secretary Alexander also shows himself supportive of the concept of choice in curriculum -- that means, even when parents do not effectively have a choice of schools, they can still choose from “alternatives on curriculum, teaching methods, and other matters.” That, indeed, is good news for parents.