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The myth of school vouchers and racism

Many have tried to link vouchers and school choice to racism, but it can't be done without a tortured reading of the law and civil rights history.

So it was a surprise to see attorneys Elizabeth Haddix and Mark Dorosin of the UNC Center for Civil Rights, do just that in "The Ugly Truth About Vouchers," (CHN, <http://bit.ly/1iiQSQT>).

The authors begin by claiming private schools "are permitted to discriminate against students on the basis of race," which is simply not true. As determined by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Runyon v. McCrary* (1976), no private school in the U.S. is permitted to discriminate based on race, color or national origin.

Next, Haddix and Dorosin argue there are "historical links between racism and private schools." Indeed, many private schools grew in enrollment during desegregation, as white students fled public schools. But to link racism and private schools is to miss the more important historical precursor: American public schools were themselves rooted in racism. African-Americans waited 235 years after the founding of the first public high school to get their first public high school. It would be another 84 years before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board* (1954) and nearly 20 more years before real integration efforts were made.

Don't forget, public school districts and elected officials fought racial integration every step of the way. Some districts zoned African-Americans completely outside their boundaries. Others shut down altogether to avoid integration. Many urban areas faced "white flight" as white families segregated themselves into whiter public school enclaves.

After whitewashing this history, the authors point to four rural, North Carolina counties where black students make up 79 to 86 percent of public school enrollment while private schools there are between 95 and 99 percent white. The point they seem intent on missing is that the new voucher plan likely would send many black students to largely white private schools – and thus reduce segregation. How is that racist?

Finally, the authors directly link North Carolina's recent voucher legislation with racist policies occurring 40 to 60 years prior. They write, "Private entities that profit from privatizing our tax dollars have not been made to answer for the racist history of their legislation."

It is a head-scratching statement given the lingering racial segregation in North Carolina along public school district lines. Though the North Carolina student population is 52 percent white and 26 percent black, districts range from 0.03 percent to 95 percent black and 3 percent to 94 percent white. Take neighboring Orange and Durham counties. Orange County is 64

percent white and 16 percent black. Durham County is 19 percent white and 51 percent black.

The authors' statements are even more disappointing when you realize the great work the UNC Center for Civil Rights has done in highlighting the inequalities facing low-income and minority students. Last year, the center's report, "The State of Exclusion," blasted public school zoning policies. The report found "failing schools" were the closest school to 48 percent of all black students in the state, while high-poverty schools were the closest to 68 percent. These rates were double the statewide average for all students.

Given the existing racial and income disparities, the most likely beneficiaries of North Carolina's voucher program – put on hold by a court injunction – are minority students. This is exactly what we saw in Florida after the state passed the Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Today, 70 percent of scholarship students attending private schools are black or Hispanic. Half of the students come from single-parent households, while the average scholarship student lives in a family with a household income just 9 percent above poverty.

Isn't this exactly the student population Haddix, Dorosin and the UNC Center for Civil Rights wish to help in North Carolina?

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