



Progressives are embracing school vouchers

By Ron Matus

Joe Trippi, the legendary Democratic consultant, is not part of any right-wing cabal. So it's noteworthy that when it comes to private school vouchers and charter schools and other forms of parental choice, he says, "We should try them all."

Trippi told me this in a recent interview, after describing how he grew up on the wrong side of a school zone, on the side where too many kids joined gangs and dropped out of school. The school board made an exception for him, but only because his mom raised hell. Now he's haunted by those left behind.

I relay Trippi's story in response to Daniel Tilson's column, "Fight public school privatization." A dominant thread in the piece is a common myth: that parental choice is the brainchild of the radical right.

The truth is, practical concerns of parents are driving the movement, not ideology. But because ideology is warping so much of the debate, I want to address that first.

Tilson is right that many conservatives like parental choice. He references George W. Bush, Jeb Bush, Neil Bush, "shadowy business interests" and the Republican Party of Florida. At least he didn't throw in the Koch Brothers! But the inconvenient truth for this line of argument is growing numbers of progressives like parental choice, too.

President Obama loves charter schools. So does former President Clinton. A few weeks ago, Howard Dean told college students he was now a die-hard for charters because they're "transforming inner city education."

New Jersey's new U.S. Senator, Democrat Cory Booker, unapologetically supports vouchers. So does Mike McCurry, Clinton's former press secretary. U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren may not, yet, but here is what she said about a universal system of public school choice: "An all-voucher system would be a shock to the educational system. But the shakeout might be just what the system needs."

In these polarized times, it's nice to see folks from across the political spectrum agreeing on anything. But

contrary to Tilson's characterization, progressives have long supported expansion of learning options.

During the civil rights movement, activists established alternatives to segregated, second-rate schools. In the 1960s, liberal intellectuals at Berkeley led the "voucher left." The late Democratic Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once crafted a tuition tax credit measure that garnered 50 co-sponsors, including Sen. George McGovern and 23 other Democrats. In a fortuitous twist, parental choice dovetails as much with progressive values of equal opportunity as with conservative values of limited government.

But again, it's not ideology that's changing the education landscape. It's parents.

Over the past 15 years, arguably no state has made more academic progress than Florida. In 1998, Florida's low-income fourth-graders ranked No. 35 among states in reading. In 2013, they ranked No. 1. Yet being No. 1 still means only 27 percent are proficient.

Studies show, again contrary to Tilson's characterization, that the students who access tax credit scholarships in Florida are the ones who struggled the most in public schools. Their parents are desperate. That's why they're lining up in droves.

There are fair questions about school choice. But I hope people will take a clear-eyed view, and not make snap judgments based on political labels that aren't accurate.

Before the scholarship bill passed last week, Sen. Jeremy Ring, D-Broward, reminded fellow lawmakers that he once opposed the scholarships, but changed his mind after visiting schools that served children from "terribly impoverished backgrounds." What he saw, he said, were kids thriving.

"So," he continued, "I for one am going to ignore the politics of this."

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