

Policy Dialogue

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School Choice in Urban Communities

Former U.S. Congressman Floyd H. Flake of New York, who has long been a leader in the fight for school choice, spoke June 6, 2000, at a Pioneer Forum on urban education reform and school choice. Reverend Flake is also senior pastor of the Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, Queens, NY, which is home to a 500-student private school. While in Congress, Reverend Flake co-sponsored a bill that would provide scholarships for children in poor neighborhoods to attend public, private, or religious schools of their choice. The following is an edited transcript of his Forum remarks.



Rev. Floyd Flake (left) with Massachusetts House Speaker Thomas Finneran at the Pioneer Forum. Looking on is Abigail Thernstrom, a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education.

I consider education to be the most important issue we face in America today, simply because it undergirds so much of what defines us as a democracy, and so much of what defines us as a people. Regardless of our race, education has been the primary key that opens the door for full participation in American society. And, therefore, it is important that all of us understand the necessity of ensuring that *Brown v. Board of Education's* intent in 1954 is fulfilled into this century.

It is very clear to me that there are a significant number of young people whose needs are not currently being addressed by the public system—the traditional system as we have known it. And, therefore, there is a necessity for change. Change has been slow in coming and still is a much slower process than I would like, but I think at least the genie is out of the bottle. And we are moving progressively toward ultimate change. The movement for change is coming up against some formidable forces that seek to protect the status quo, but the protection of the status quo does not assure that every child will get a good quality education.

As we study the system, we see it has four tiers. First, there are a number of young people who are being educated in suburban schools and generally are getting a quality education, although even this is not the case when quality is measured against the standards of other nations.

Second, there is a tier of young people who escaped from urban communities into some of the better schools. Some get out because parents use legal or whatever means

For statistics on student performance on standardized tests, visit the National Center for Educational Statistics website at www.nces.ed.gov.

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they can to insure that their child will get a good education, and so they find schools for them. Some others go into either private or parochial schools, particularly Catholic schools, so that they might be able to get the benefit of that education.

Read "Putting Our Kids First: Reform and Choice in Education" online at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/dialogues/pidlg20.cfm.

The third tier is primarily comprised of young people in urban communities, and for the most part, they have no way out. They have no access to quality education, and their choices are limited. Even when the school systems or the school districts next door have seats available, these are not the young people who will get them. Only when parents take the initiative and force that district to receive their child will a seat be provided; the child will not automatically be accepted.

The fourth tier is the one that we rarely talk about, and that is special education. Once children have been tracked into special education, they rarely get back into a normal class. Having been separated from the population, they wind up part of the growing criminal justice enterprise. They have no skills to offer in the marketplace, so they make behavioral choices that ultimately lead to their destruction, and to the destruction of many lives in their communities.

Suggested Solutions

So how do we address this problem? Can we solve it within the traditional public construct? I would argue that it is impossible. It is impossible because the bureaucratic structures that are in place have brought a level of satisfaction to those who are responsible. They will argue for some reforms, but not real reform. They will insist that changes are taking place, but the fact is there is no evidence that such reforms are actually meeting the needs of the majority of the students in the system.

Indeed, if we are to measure by test scores, we discover that in almost every urban community in America, the young people who are the products of the system are not able to compete. Their scores, generally, are less than 40 percent of what they ought to be. We must address the system in ways that challenge it to reform and not merely present an image of reform.

In every city, there are those who are part of the public process. Those who are part of the unions, who blame everyone else for the problem, offer solutions that they know will not ultimately solve this problem. They argue that the problem can be solved merely by putting more money into the budget. I argue that it is not a question of money; it is a matter of how it is allocated. If allocations do not include access to computers and to modern materials in each and every school, regardless of the community, then the young people who are not currently getting a quality education will still not get it, even if more monies are provided.

They also argue that smaller classes will make a difference. I agree. However, it is not merely the size of the class, it is also the level of expectation. The issue is whether teachers are determined to raise standards and whether children reaching for that standard feel some sense of joy in having met it.

If we are to measure by test scores, we discover that in almost every urban community in America, the young people who are the products of the system are not able to compete. Their scores, generally, are well below 40 percent of what they ought to be. We must address the system in ways that challenge it to reform and not merely present an image of reform.

Read "Competition, Choice and the Structure of Public Education" online at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/dialogues/pidlg16.cfm.

Learn about the work of the Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center at www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrc.

Read how the oldest group of Massachusetts charter schools are doing: "Early grades good for charter schools" at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/opeds/checking.cfm.

and also magnet schools that become charter schools, so that they might access the capitation rate that will allow them to function.

There are many barriers in front of the charter school movement, but I do think that it is more palatable for the traditional educational community than almost any of the other programs that have been offered. I think that over time we're going to see a growing and emerging market and movement around charters.

There are problems, though, even for charter schools. Every state that I've been in has created some barriers. I think that these barriers are put there in part to make it impossible to develop the necessarily empirical data to analyze how these charter schools function relative to traditional public schools.

Standardized testing as currently used cannot serve this purpose. The fact is, whether you're testing fourth graders or seventh graders, and you've had a charter school in operation for only one year, your results are not going to reflect significant increases in learning. It is impossible to take a child who has had five years in the public system, and put them in our school, for example, and expect that by eighth grade they will graduate with skills equal to those of a child who entered at pre-K. If we teach a kid from pre-K through eighth grade, guaranteed that child will be placed in a terrific high school, because we've had eight years to get him ready. If we take a kid in the fifth grade, we have to spend at least one year trying to reprogram and reorient him to the fact that this is a serious educational environment.

And by the time that reorientation process takes place, we still have not gotten him up to the level of the other fifth graders. Though my wife generally requires participation in the summer program, it is still a difficult task to get a child ready in three years with the damage that has been done in the first five years. If we're going to do a real analysis, we would have to start each kid at the same place, and then by fourth grade, measure them based on the fact that some started first grade in charter schools, others started in public schools. I think then we would discover that indeed charter schools have an opportunity to be the preeminent system within the structure of education in America.

The other problem we face is the many statutory limitations. I think in every state there are limitations. They set limits on the number of schools to keep the database down. The smaller the database, they believe, the greater the probability that this growing baby will never get beyond the embryonic stage. This is an area that I think we need to spend some time, and hopefully policy groups like Pioneer will continue to fight to get some of the statutory limits removed.

Another problem is that certain amendments have been placed in legislation throughout the country. New York has a so-called Blaine Amendment, which precludes religious institutions from either converting their schools to charter schools or from starting charter schools. Now, the tragedy of that is, if you look in most urban communities, the most solvent and most visible institution is the church. And in many instances, those churches have classrooms that are only utilized for an hour

I strongly support the voucher movement, because it sends a signal to the system that change is taking place. Vouchers alone, though, will not solve the problem because in many instances, parents will be unable to bridge the gap between what the voucher pays and what is required in order to get a quality education for their child.

For a look at the charter school movement nationally, see "Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education" at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/dialogues/dia33.cfm.

Charter schools probably offer us the greatest hope and the greatest possibility for being able to challenge the system. I am so convinced of it that I dare to believe that federal, state, and city dollars will eventually create a parallel system of traditional schools and charter schools.

See "School Choice, the Law, and the Constitution: A Primer for Parents and Reformers" at www.heritage.org/library/categories/education/bg1139.html.

and a half or so on Sunday morning. The transformation of those institutions into schools would be almost instant. And so the amendment has been put in place to eliminate this opportunity to open more schools very quickly.

The third great barrier has to do with real estate. An inability to find real estate has made it difficult even for the several schools that have received charters in New York.

This is not going to be an easy fight; this is not for the faint of heart. It's a battle that we must win, and we must understand that those who control the purse strings in government have made a decision that they are also in it to win.

Representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union have argued that it is against the Constitution to try to deliver education this way. I challenge anyone to examine the Constitution and find any clause that says that all public education must be delivered through the current construct. Of course, they lean on the establishment clause, which simply states that the government shall not be involved in any means of trying to create religion or block religion, but it does not say anything about schools. Our challenge is to move forward with an understanding that the government does have the power to create a secondary construct if necessary, so that it might be able to deliver to taxpaying citizens and individuals, who have been guaranteed the right to a quality education, the opportunity to get it.

The reality for me is that until the day comes when there is an urban community that can advertise a property along with the school district that it is in, then our problem is not resolved. You cannot build strong stable communities when you do not have strong, stable schools.

Our greatest challenge is to use all of the vehicles—vouchers, tax credits, charters, magnets, whatever is available to us—to try to change the face of education in America. Let us make sure that public education is quality education, and that all children, regardless of race and regardless of socioeconomic background, will have access to it, so that they may stand up and be competitive in this society.

For more information on the impact of choice on other public schools, see "Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools?" at www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_10.htm.

To discuss the issue of education reform, choice, and charter schools further, logon to Pioneer Network at www.pioneernet.org/forums.cfm?Ref=forums.cfm. Pioneer Network is a virtual community of scholars, policy experts, journalists, and opinion leaders which is dedicated to providing a forum for leading edge scholarship and market-oriented solutions to public policy issues.