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Breaking down the school doors
Washington on the brink of school choice

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American democracy rests upon the individual's freedom of choice, a freedom which entails breaking up monopolies. Breaking up business monopolies like Microsoft is an example of the federal government's insistence upon fair competition, which is favored because it forces people or groups to give consumers the best service for the best price possible. In essence, it gives power to individuals to decide for themselves how they spend their money.

But while America demands that businesses allow for competition, Americans do not demand the same of their government, particularly when it comes to the public education system. It would seem logical that if competition is seen as positive in business, it should also help to improve crumbling schools. Nowhere is public education failing American families and children more than in the nation's capital.

In Washington D.C., the debate over school choice has come full circle. It is the test case where school choice could prove itself to be what its supporters say it is: the solution for the public education problem in America. Public school students in the District rank near the bottom on every standardized test in the entire country. This fact is particularly disheartening when combined with the fact that, according to the Cato Institute, the District's per-pupil spending ranks among the highest in the nation, \$10,550 for 1999-2000. Although spending has increased 39% since Mayor Anthony Williams took office in 1998, the system lacks qualified teachers, safe facilities and even basic supplies such as pencils and textbooks.

Williams, as well as School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, had previously opposed voucher plans, citing the fact that money given to a voucher plan would divert needed money from public schools. But because they, and all voucher opponents, admit that the District's school system is in trouble, these two leaders realized the need to consider options beyond spending more money and propping up the broken system. When they looked at the options before them - the bill before Congress supporting an experimental voucher plan with the backing of frustrated parents or more money wasted in a broken system - they decided to call on Congress to pass the legislation.

In reaching their decision, Williams and Cafritz looked at the facts. According to the Heritage Foundation, “A 2003 Manhattan Institute analysis of the Florida A+ program found that vouchers provided a strong incentive for schools to improve. . . Researchers found that schools in direct competition for students made educational gains greater than those of other low-performing schools that are not facing voucher competition.” Harvard Professor Caroline Hoxby recently found that “school choice raises school productivity and student achievement within the

public school system.” Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), who has always held a vehement hatred for vouchers, wrote in a recent *Washington Post* editorial, “As a former mayor, I also believe that local leaders [D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams] should have the opportunity to experiment with programs that they believe are right for their area.”

What exactly is the problem, one might ask? Voucher experiments in Milwaukee and Cleveland have shown their ability to both allow children from low-income backgrounds to escape failing schools and improve the failing public inner-city schools through competition. While most Democrats still oppose the plan, most notably Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, some have started to leave the mold of immediate opposition to any voucher plan. For example, Senators Feinstein, Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and other prominent figures of the Democratic Party have shown past and more recent support for vouchers.

It is interesting to note that those in continuing opposition are powerful lobbying groups who support maintaining the current public school system, despite its horrific state. Two such groups are The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). They desire to maintain the status quo that keeps them in power and their influence over the current system secure. Allowing parents a choice in the system would detract from their ability to retain control over the education of America’s children. Because their influence on education policy is at stake, they are resorting to what can only be characterized as scare tactics. The AFT writes on its website, “The money that some in Congress want to spend on vouchers would be better spent helping all DC students. Studies are showing improvement in the past few years in DC schools; the last thing these schools need is less funding.” In reality, the bill would add more funding to D.C. public schools for school construction and other needed materials *in addition to* providing scholarships to private schools for lower-income individuals.

At this point, the unions are grasping for excuses to deny students the right to attend the school of their choice. However, they are running out of excuses, since the politicians they relied on to keep the system intact in the District are finally acknowledging the facts.

In May 1998, *The Washington Post* published a survey that found significant support for a voucher bill akin to the current one. Sixty-five percent of the District’s African-Americans surveyed who had incomes under \$50,000 favored the option to send their children to public or private institutions. Other polls in the District mirror the same view: parents want a choice for their children. Thus, the battle is one between the disadvantaged, who want access to the same private schools that the rich can afford to attend, and the powerful teacher’s unions who must see to it that the status quo is maintained.

At present, it is the powerful unions who have greatest influence because of their accessibility to politicians. According to the Heritage Foundation, if every Member of Congress who uses private schools for their children votes to give disadvantaged D.C. families the same access, the legislation will pass. Forty-eight Democrats and thirteen Republicans who voted against D.C. vouchers in the 2003 H.R. 1350 bill also have children in private school. Unfortunately, they are not willing to give poorer students the same opportunities afforded their children.

It is a moral imperative to force a vote on the issue, since the issue of access to a quality education boils down to civil rights. Currently, some are trying to block the door for the disadvantaged because otherwise their power and influence will be in jeopardy. At the very least, it is time to try the voucher experiment and give D.C.'s families more say in their children's education. Like the civil rights fight in the 1960s, it is time to break down the school doors that are blocking lower-income children the right to a better education.