

A Labor of Love

Colorado's School Voucher Program

By Pamela Benigno

Last spring, after more than a decade of toil expended and vast financial resources spent, Colorado's school choice activists and supportive policymakers celebrated the passage of the Colorado Opportunity Contract Pilot Program. The school voucher program, sponsored by State Representative Nancy Spence (R-Centennial), will provide qualifying low-income students residing in 11 school districts with poor-performing schools with the choice to attend private and parochial schools.

Now the labor has tremendously increased as school choice activists and the public school system work to implement the program. For some it is a labor of love, while to others it is a labor of disdain. For many it is simply resigned cooperation – after all, it is the law.

The State Board of Education has astutely formed an advisory committee to assist in the implementation of the program. Made up of an exceptionally diverse group of individuals, including a free market think tank and the state teachers union, the committee has been charged with the task of designing policies and documents for the program. The word “cooperative” best describes the committee's personality, though reporters attend the meetings at the Department of Education hoping to catch one of the committee's spirited debates.

Such a debate took place on November 12th, as an attorney from the teachers union argued before a Denver district judge that the program is unconstitutional, while the State of Colorado and the Institute for Justice defended it. The judge's

ruling is expected in early December.

Outside the walls of government buildings, relentless grassroots activists of all colors and political affiliations have joined together from across 200 miles to meet the deadlines prescribed by the law.

This “alliance” has recruited and guided private and parochial schools in the application process. They have identified thousands of families who plan to apply for an Opportunity Contract. Some within the alliance are providing legal help, and others are contributing financial resources.

The Independence Institute is a partner in this undertaking, along with the Colorado Alliance for Reform in Education, directed by former congressman Bob Schaffer. Other school choice organizations such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Coalition for Latino Children in Education are also a part of the effort to achieve success. To all of them, success means poor children, mostly minorities, will have the opportunity of a lifetime – to escape a failing school and receive a first-rate education.

Though lacking the activist’s passion, the Colorado Association of School Boards and the Colorado Association of School Executives have been extremely cooperative. However, the rubber meets the road at the local school district level. The 11 school districts mandated to participate in the program have either expressed their annoyance with the program by creating obstacles, or hidden their annoyance by being politely professional.

Three school districts in Adams County (suburban Denver) denied the applications of several well-established Catholic schools that mostly serve low-income minority children. The districts claim the reason for denial was that the

schools discriminate on the basis of disability. Such practice would be a legal reason for preventing a non-public school from participating in the program, but these particular Catholic schools serve many students suffering from a broad range of physical and learning disabilities. The denials will be appealed to the Colorado State Board of Education.

On the other hand the two largest school districts in the state, Denver Public Schools and Jefferson County Public Schools, have given non-public schools an opportunity to make amendments to their applications or to submit required documents past the deadline.

With both private secular and religious schools able to participate in the program, 128 schools applied by the October 1st deadline. Results vary weekly on the number of schools that have been accepted or denied. In many cases, a school will be accepted by one district but denied in another.

In the fall of 2004, the Opportunity Contract Pilot Program will begin serving approximately 3,300 students, and the fruits of the labor will be evident. By the fall of 2007, approximately 20,000 low-income students will have experienced educational freedom.

School districts claiming they only want the best for children need to understand the manner in which Colorado now educates the public has changed.

Pamela Benigno is the director of the Education Policy Center at the Independence Institute, a Colorado free market think tank. She serves on the state advisory committee and works with grassroots organizations to implement Colorado's new school voucher program.

Learn more about the
Independence Institute
at www.i2i.org!