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In Texas, Give Choice a Chance

A showdown has been taking place this week in Austin, Texas -- a fight that pits school reformers and parents against the state teachers' unions. At issue is an initiative that would become the most comprehensive parental choice law in the nation. Designed by San Antonio-based policy entrepreneur and philanthropist Jim Leininger, the plan would provide vouchers to 20,000 kids in failing or physically unsafe inner-city schools. The vouchers -- equal in value to 90% of the public school's cost of educating a single student -- could be used to pay tuition at a private or parochial school.

Alas, Round One of this prizefight goes to the teachers' unions. On Monday the education establishment's intimidation tactics succeeded in spurring a dozen Republicans to join Democrats in torpedoing the bill by just two votes. But school choice advocates haven't thrown in the towel. Mr. Leininger vows to fight on and bring the initiative to the Senate today, where he has a powerful ally in Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst, a tireless advocate of the plan. Another strong supporter is the Texas Public Policy Foundation, whose president, Brooke Rollins, argues that a victory in the Senate would keep the bill alive for a return engagement in the House.

The voucher program would carry a price tag of just \$100 million, or about 0.8% of the state's education budget; more than two-thirds of the eligible students would be Hispanic or black. The program might even be a financial winner for public schools, since they would continue to collect 10% of the cost of educating students they no longer have responsibility for. Naturally, union officials and educrats have criticized the proposal as somehow bad for kids, but it's the possibility of success that mortifies them. It wouldn't be a Herculean task for private alternative schools to out-compete inner-city schools in places like Dallas, where one study found a dropout rate of 57% within four years among the 14,789 ninth graders who enrolled in 1998-99.

For many years now Texas has been operating under a court order to provide more equitable financing of public schools throughout the state. This year the legislature is fixing to spend \$3 billion of added funds for a vast array of conventional school reforms: smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, new standards and testing procedures, and more capital spending. All of this has been tried in other states with almost universally uninspiring results. What has rarely been tried, because it has rarely been allowed, is to give low-income parents the option enjoyed by more affluent families to send their kid elsewhere, thereby forcing schools to compete for customers. Although the education establishment may have won Round One in Texas, the fight for low-income parents to have such an option is far from settled. Stay tuned.

-- Stephen Moore

