

The Sun

May 3, 2007 Edition > Section: [Opinion](#) > [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

School Choice Besieged

BY JOHN STOSSEL - JFS Productions, Inc.

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I've been on the road lately, giving speeches at universities, think tanks, and community groups to let people know about the release of the paperback edition of "Myths, Lies, and Downright Stupidity." On the book tour I notice that the people who seem the most energized are school-choice advocates.

Many of them are under attack.

When the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing individual liberty, criticized the Washington state teachers union's use of dues to politick against school choice, the union attacked the organization with full-page newspaper ads and prime-time 30-second radio spots.

The ads called EFF a "right wing extremist 'think tank'" that uses "bundles of cash" to promote its agenda. Union spokespeople also called them "trolls," "lying dirt bags," and "evil ... zealots." According to one union supporter, "Those scum are lower than sewer water, and smell less pleasant."

EFF uses "bundles of cash"? That's some myth. Its budget is nothing compared to the state's teachers union, which spends eight times more money on politics than the state's Republican and Democratic parties combined.

EFF gets its money from people who volunteer, rather than lifting it from paychecks of teachers who have no choice in the matter.

EFF contributors include people like housekeeper Gussie Hoff. Ms. Hoff gave Evergreen \$30 a month for 11 years, and even though she's now unable to work, she still sends money — with an apology for not being able to do more.

Attacks from powerful unions haven't dimmed the passion of school-choice advocates. It's as if they say to themselves, "You can call us names, but we know what we are doing is morally right."

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In San Antonio, Texas, Jim and Cecilia Leininger have spent \$10 million of their own money to give private-school scholarships to 8,000 students who were struggling in government schools.

At a meeting of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, Mr. Leininger said, "We hadn't had this program going for one month, and the principal of a school in San Antonio called us and said, 'I've got two black kids in my school that are identical twins. They've just entered the sixth grade. They're 11 years old. They're good kids. They're good students. They don't want to be in a gang. The gang is after them. And if you don't give them a scholarship on an emergency basis, they're going to get killed.'"

The horror stories went on and on. "We had one little girl who was told the very first day she got to middle school that at 11 years old, she was too pretty to be a virgin," Mr. Leininger said. "These guys tried to rape her right in the classroom at the end of the day. Purely by God's grace, the teacher came back into the room and started screaming just before this little girl was violated.

"A little blond first-grade girl was going to a school on the far west side of San Antonio. Nine older boys sharpened pencils and ran in circles around her, stabbing her with these pencils. She was stabbed 39 times.

"One mom we talked to, her child was hiding in the closet, kicking and screaming, afraid to go to school. He'd just entered the sixth grade, just met the gang. She was crying when she called us and said, 'I can't send him back there where the gangs are after him, but what can I do?'"

Mr. Leininger gave her and the other desperate children "emergency scholarships."

Unfortunately, thousands more who would like to escape the government school monopoly cannot. Mr. Leininger hopes that some day all Texas kids will have the opportunities his scholarship recipients get.

For advocating vouchers that would allow that to happen, reporters called him "evil." The San Antonio Express News even characterized the school-choice debate as voucher advocates vs. "pro-education" candidates.

Voucher proponents are not pro-education? Give me a break.

Mr. Stossel is co-anchor of ABC News' "20/20" and the author of "Myth, Lies, and Downright Stupidity: Get Out the Shovel — Why Everything You Know is Wrong," which is now available in paperback.

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