

Vouchers Can Help Kids and Big-City Politicians

Politicians in cash-strapped municipalities can give families choice while saving money.

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In his former post as White House chief of staff, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel famously remarked: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." What he said next is less remembered: "And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before."

These words come to mind as municipal governments across the country—from Stockton, Calif., to Jefferson County, Ala., to Mr. Emanuel's own city—grapple with massively underfunded public pensions, lowered bond ratings, and the prospect of layoffs for thousands of teachers and other public employees. These crises are opportunities for leaders to do things they could not do before.

I see this most clearly in public education. As a former chairman of the education committee on the District of Columbia City Council, I've experienced firsthand the tensions between paying bills racked up in the past and honoring the obligations we have to young students in the present and future. It is deeply unfair to settle adult disputes over pension obligations and fiscal mismanagement on the backs of school children who weren't even alive when the problems were created. In D.C., we chose to put our children first. Other cities can do the same.

How? By unleashing parental choice in education. While public-school systems take the painful steps necessary to remain solvent, public dollars can and should follow students to less costly and higher-performing private schools and public-charter schools.

The word "voucher" is a dirty word to many teachers and administrators in public schools, but it shouldn't be. With a well-run parental-choice program, elected officials and administrators can significantly reduce the stress on public-school budgets while living up to their obligation to provide great educational opportunities for young people.

In 2004, when I headed the D.C. City Council education committee, we secured federal funding for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provides vouchers to low-income students for tuition at private schools that outperformed public schools. We also secured funding to improve the city's charter and traditional public schools. Between 2004 and 2012, the program received more than 11,000 applications and awarded 4,900 scholarships.

In June 2012, after the Obama administration nearly phased the program out, House Speaker John Boehner and then Sen. Joseph Lieberman reached an agreement with the Education Department to renew the scholarships. As Mr. Boehner said at the time: "Thousands of families have taken advantage of this scholarship program to give their children an opportunity to succeed in life, and there's strong evidence that it's both effective and cost-effective." In the 2011-12 school year, D.C. students who used the scholarship program to attend private schools had a high-school graduation rate of more than 90%. The city's charter schools had a graduation rate of 77%, far above the traditional public-school graduation rate of 56%.

Other elected officials across the country are making similar choices. Last year, in the midst of a budget crisis, Louisiana lawmakers expanded the Louisiana Scholarship Program. Begun in New Orleans in 2008, the program provides low-income parents whose children are assigned to a failing school the opportunity to send them to a private school.

This school year, some 8,000 students statewide—91% of them minority—are using vouchers to attend private schools. A survey conducted in February by the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Louisiana Federation for Children reported that 93.6% of parents were satisfied with their child's academic progress in the voucher program. The new statewide program includes strong accountability measurements in order to remove schools that do not increase student proficiency.

According to the Louisiana Department of Education, the program is also saving the state's taxpayers an estimated \$16 million a year. The average scholarship last year was about \$5,000, while the average amount spent per public-school student was about \$8,500.

Empowering communities and families requires leaders with the guts to step out of their political comfort zones. There will be no shortage of defenders of the status quo, teachers unions chief among them. But that's no reason to let this crisis go to waste.

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