

Vouchers are the obvious choice

Friday, December 14, 2007

by TOM MORAN

The Star-Ledger

To the Rev. Reginald Jackson, head of the Black Ministers' Council, the remarkable success of the state's private preschools holds an obvious lesson.

We need more school choice. We need to break the monopoly of the public school system. We need to build on this success by at least experimenting with vouchers in the K-12 system.

"These preschools, 70 percent of which are privately owned, are providing a good foundation for these children," he says. "The only way we're going to know if it would make a difference in the later grades is by giving it a chance."

That, of course, is not going to happen in New Jersey. Because here, even talk of vouchers causes the teachers unions and the education establishment to break out in hives.

A voucher system would allow parents to pick whatever school they want, public or private. And these guys don't want anybody to mess with their cozy monopoly, which works so well for all the adults involved.

Already, some educators in the suburbs are taking up battle stations. As the governor moves to expand preschool offerings to their districts, they are promising to keep the private preschools out of the loop.

"We would prefer to do it ourselves," says Somerville Superintendent Carol Leary. "They will start out here as 3-year-olds and hopefully go right through high school."

It's a pity, because the preschool program today is probably the most remarkable success story of the last decade in this beleaguered state.

It relies on a healthy mix of public and private preschools that all receive public money -- even those that are religiously inspired. About 45,000 children attend the schools, most of them in the poor urban districts known as Abbotts.

The results are in. The first wave of these kids have reached grammar school, and are showing markedly higher scores on their reading and math tests. Fewer of them are landing in expensive special education programs. And teachers say these students tend to be better behaved.

How did this happen in a state that has taken such a hard line on school vouchers, and has only grudgingly allowed charter schools?

It was an accident. The Supreme Court in 1999 ordered the state to establish preschools in the Abbott districts, and the public schools didn't have the space or the teachers to do the job. They made room for private schools because the court put a gun to their head. Even the teachers unions went along.

"Initially I was dead-set against it, too," says Tom Dunn, the former superintendent in Elizabeth who now lobbies for school administrators. "But I was proven wrong."

As a convert, Dunn knows how public educators can turn this into a turf war, how someone like

Leary could insist on banning private schools when she concedes she has no room in her own schools to do the job.

"There's a feeling that I'm going to be responsible for this, so I want control, and I don't want to be blamed for something that goes wrong," he says. "I can understand that initial reaction. But this works. And I plan to work with the superintendents to embrace this."

Maybe some districts will bite. Maybe they'll realize that the important point is whether the preschool is teaching children effectively, not whether it is public or private.

In the Abbott preschools, the state was perfectly impartial. It insisted on small class sizes, qualified teachers, and a proven curriculum. And it sent in teaching coaches, and enough money to make it work. That supervision is far more aggressive than is typical in pure voucher systems, so this is really a kind of hybrid.

But the preschools in these districts are both public and private. And because parents make the final choice about where to enroll their kids, the schools must compete for business.

So here we are. We have a success story, and the question is whether we have the wisdom to repeat it.

Meanwhile, Jackson says he will keep tilting at his windmill, pushing for a voucher system in the upper grades. He knows he won't get it anytime soon. But for him, this is at its core a human rights issue.

It is simply wrong, he says, to force poor children into public school monopolies when everyone knows many of these schools are failing, and even dangerous. He often asks a simple and telling question of those who disagree: "If you were in one of these urban districts, would you send your children there?"

Jackson is not quitting on the public schools. He sits on the board in Orange. And he is chairman of the board at Essex County Community College, where he says more than 80 percent of those graduating from the public schools need remedial classes.

"I've been in Jersey for 30 years and ever since I've been here they've talked about reforming the public schools, and they haven't," he says. "That is my major frustration."

And it will remain so, in all likelihood. Because New Jersey's political establishment is not about to yield on this one -- no matter what magic is being brewed in those Abbott preschools.

Tom Moran may be reached at tmoran@starledger.com or (973) 392-1823.

© 2007 The Star Ledger
© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved