

敬啓者：

鑒於現時香港社會對教育改革中應否採用「學券制」的問題有不少意見，故本人建議立法會在這方面多作研究，參考外國實行「學券制」的經驗。

本人從三月十日《經濟學人》的報導中知悉，美國威斯康辛州密西根湖西岸的密耳瓦基(Milwaukee)及俄亥俄州北部的克利夫蘭(Cleveland)實行「學卷制」的情況，頗為理想。因此，本人希望 貴事務委員會同意邀請立法會秘書處就這問題進行研究，然後更可考慮組團前往該兩城市進行考察及交流。

因此，本人特具此函致 閣下，建議在 貴委員會會議席上，向各議員提出邀請立法會秘書處就「學券制」問題、上述兩城市實行「學券制」的經驗及其他國家的「學券制」情況，進行研究及資料收集。在參考了研究報告後，若委員會認為有需要，可以考慮前往上述兩城市進行考察。煩請賜覆，為荷。並頌
籌祺！

此致
立法會教育事務委員會主席
楊森議員

立法會議員

劉慧卿謹上

二零零零年三月十四日

附件：三月十日《經濟學人》文章

UNITED STATES



Blacks v teachers

WASHINGTON, DC

Two of the Democrats' bedrock constituencies are heading for a fight over school choice

THE presidential primary debates between Bill Bradley and Al Gore are little more than a historical footnote. But the debate last year in Harlem's Apollo Theatre, one of the holy places of black America, did include one exchange that will re-echo in Democratic politics in the coming years.

Tamela Edwards, a young black journalist, asked Vice-President Gore why he so adamantly opposed school vouchers, which allow parents to choose where to spend their education money, while sending his own children to private schools. "Is there not a public or charter school in DC good enough for your child?" she asked, to applause. "And, if not, why should the parents here have to keep their kids in public schools because they don't have the financial resources that you do?"

It is hardly surprising that this question resonated with the predominantly black audience. Last year, a national opinion poll conducted by the Joint Centre for Political and Economic Studies found that 57% of blacks support vouchers: especially people under 35 (75%) and people with children in the household (74%). Blacks and whites agree that education is the most important

problem facing the country. But blacks were more likely than whites to think that the public schools are getting worse—and more likely than whites to support vouchers.

The reason for this support is simple: blacks (who are disproportionately concentrated in inner-city areas) are getting a lousy deal from the public-school system. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, America's equivalent of a national report card, reveals that the average black 17-year-old is four years behind his white counterpart in maths and reading and five years behind in science. Black students are three times more likely than whites to be shunted off into dead-end special educational classes.

A majority of poor blacks have probably been in favour of vouchers for years. What is new is the growing willingness of black leaders to voice their feelings. A decade ago, only a handful were willing to support vouchers—notably Polly Williams, once a welfare mother in Milwaukee, Howard Fuller, a veteran of the black-power movement who helped Ms Williams to create the city's voucher programme, and Floyd Flake, a former Democratic congressman turned one-

man urban regeneration machine. But two things are changing the balance of power.

The first is that pro-voucher blacks have established a lobbying group to plead their cause. The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is only a few months old. But it attracted a boisterous crowd of more than 700 activists from 35 states at its recent symposium in Milwaukee, including teachers, religious and political leaders, and community activists such as the splendidly named Queen Sister Afrika of a group called We Are the Village People.

Phyllis Berry Myers, the director of the Centre for New Black Leadership, says that most of the people who turned up were "front-line warriors" who spend their lives dealing with the consequences of failing schools. The organisation's aim is to link the voucher movement with poor blacks, not rich whites (such as Tim Draper, a Silicon Valley businessman whose pro-voucher initiative failed miserably on the ballot in California last November). It is spending heavily on television advertisements that feature black parents and grandparents talking about the way that school choice has improved their children's lives.

The second change is the emergence of a younger generation of black leaders in their late 20s and 30s. Kaleem Caire, the head of BAEO, abandoned a career in educational administration to fight for vouchers because he thought that the system was short-changing poor black children. Cory Booker, who was educated at Stanford, Yale and Oxford (as a Rhodes scholar) before being elected to the Newark City Council in 1998, argues that the only way to fix the educational system is to return power to parents. Omar Wasow, who runs a website called blackplanet.com, sees school choice as a direct outgrowth of *Brown v Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision of 1954 that desegregated public schools.

For this generation, vouchers is the new civil-rights issue. "Did we sit down at a lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina," Mr Fuller asks, referring to an anti-segregation protest in 1960, "to arrive at another lunch counter today where... we can't read the menu?" Others refer to Malcolm X's drive for black empowerment. Why shouldn't poor people have the right to exercise a choice that their richer brethren take for granted?

These outspoken younger blacks are having an effect on the established black leadership. Andrew Young, Kurt Schmoke (a former mayor of Baltimore) and Martin Luther King III have all embraced vouchers. Meanwhile, a cadre of ambitious black poli-

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ticians who would never have flirted with such a dangerous idea a few years ago now count themselves as supporters: politicians such as Marvin Pratt, the president of Milwaukee's Common Council, who plans to run for mayor in 2002, and Dwight Evans, a Pennsylvania state legislator.

The hitch, of course, is that most old-style black leaders remain opposed. No black congressman has been willing to break with the teachers' unions on the issue. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People also follows the teachers' union line that vouchers will destroy the country's public schools. Black teachers and administrators in urban school systems regard the idea as anathema. Urban school boards are huge political and financial machines: the Philadelphia school board, for example, has 25,000 employees and an annual budget of \$1.6 billion.

Meanwhile, the voucher movement is internally divided and, nationally, weak. Most blacks support targeted vouchers for poor parents. Mr Draper wanted to introduce universal vouchers. The conservative Cato Institute prefers tax credits to vouchers. David Bositis, of the Joint Centre for Political and Economic Studies, points out that the two most important voting blocks in the population—white suburbanites and the elderly—are hostile to vouchers. That explains the movement's ballot defeats last November in both California and Michigan, as well as George Bush's current reluctance to push

vouchers in education reform.

On the other hand, the centre of gravity of the voucher debate is plainly changing. An idea that was dreamt up by a white Republican, Milton Friedman, now depends on black support for its success. Where blacks embrace the idea, such as in Milwaukee and Cleveland, it prospers; where they withhold their support, as in Detroit, it fails; and in America's vast white suburbs it is not even on the agenda.

This changing climate also applies to blacks and Democrats. The NAACP increasingly represent a reactionary and ageing fringe. (The average age of its leadership is far higher than that of organisations like the BAEO.) The Urban League, the other main black group, still hesitates to endorse vouchers officially. But its leaders are enthusiastic about things like charter schools, and some of its most prominent members, such as T. Willard Fair, are voucher evangelists.

But the biggest reason why the centre of gravity is shifting is simple: vouchers seem to work. A study by Paul Petersen, a Harvard professor, of black children who were selected by lottery to receive scholarships to private schools in three cities, Dayton, New York and Washington, found that they pulled ahead of their peers who remained in public schools. Meanwhile, they are not damaging public schools. In Florida, for instance, the threat that children would receive vouchers to attend private schools spurred the 76 worst-performing schools to

make big academic strides. And, even if you get stuck in the many squabbles about such studies, there is the most powerful evidence of all: word of mouth. Blacks are telling each other that vouchers work.

It would be foolish to underestimate the power of the educational establishment: it seems capable of absorbing any criticism and neutralising any reforms. But supporters of vouchers have changed education in Milwaukee and Cleveland, and they are gaining support in other cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago. A national revolution is too much to hope for. But poor blacks may well revolutionise their educational opportunities city by city and state by state.

An idea for Mr Bush

George Bush has the power to turn his backyard, Washington, DC, into a national showcase for school vouchers. He should use it



POLITICS, the practitioners so often say, is about compromise. There is no point, pragmatists insist through clouds of cigar smoke, in letting the best be the enemy of the good. Such noises, as understandable as they are disappointing, have been coming from George Bush about education.

School vouchers, which give parents the chance to choose where to spend their education money, will apparently have to be dropped from federal education reforms, in order to force through other improvements. That compromise, which would deprive poor parents of what looks like the best way to shake up America's lacklustre schools, is probably being accepted far too quickly, even on "pragmatic" grounds. But, even if Mr Bush gives in, there is still room for him to push through a smaller but eminently achievable reform—introducing vouchers in the District of Columbia.

Begin with the overall fudge. America's high schools, by most international standards, deliver terribly poor results. During the campaign, Mr Bush promised structural change, forcing teachers and schools to be more accountable. True to his word, his very first legislative proposal was to do with

education, introducing more testing, more penalties for poor performance and, yes, a limited voucher plan.

Vouchers are not a magic bullet for America's schools. But the evidence from places like Milwaukee and Cleveland suggests they do help performance, and they do so not by destroying public schools, as the anti-voucher forces claim, but by forcing public schools to improve their performance. Ford's cars benefit from having Toyota as a competitor; Harvard's standards have not been lowered by the existence of Yale. If choice works for America's splendid universities, why not try it on those dreadful high schools?

The two main reasons offered are realpolitik and federalism. Democrats will probably support Mr Bush's plan, if he drops the bit that annoys the teachers' unions most; also, the federal government only contributes about 7% of the education budget, so most of the action happens at state level. Both are fair points. But there are still good reasons for wishing Mr Bush would put up more of a fight. Many Democratic constituencies—including poor blacks—seem keen on school choice. There is also surely room to use the bully pulpit of the presi-

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line or to pick up passengers and fly them around the country. America forces "open skies" deals on many countries, while keeping its home market, which accounts for over a third of world air travel, tightly closed. Among other American industries, only shipping enjoys such protection.

The merging airlines advocate the benefits of larger networks offering smoother transfer through hubs. They would, wouldn't they. Theoretically, other things equal, they are right: the larger the network the better, for both producer and consumer. But in the real world American travellers have seen the chaos caused by labour rows at three of the top six airlines in the past two years, and worry that fewer, bigger air-

lines would lead to bigger screw-ups.

In other network industries, such as telecoms, the big companies are "common carriers" obliged to offer access to competitors who can buy capacity on the network, and sell it on to consumers. The only way that happens in airlines is through old-fashioned bucket shops or their online Internet equivalents. The airlines dominate the former (choosing when to offload spare seats) and are seeking to rule the websites too. Instead they should be obliged to throw open their cabins, row by row, seat by seat to independent web retailers. That is the sort of regulation which boosts competition, not the kind that stifles it.