

## **Addressing education in the Presidential debates (around August 2000)**

With education being the number one concern among voters, I have been concerned with how little attention has been given to the subject by Gov. Bush and Vice President Gore. Being a supporter of school choice, I have been waiting for this subject to be addressed in earnest.

I know that past Presidential candidates have kept their distance for fear of upsetting the teacher unions. I have been disappointed with Democrats for engaging in fear mongering - spreading the false notion that one form of school choice (vouchers) would take money away from the public schools. I had been under the impression that parents in the suburbs, who would be inclined to vote Republican, have been opposed to vouchers for this reason. I have tried to make the case for many years that a voucher system, taking advantage of available space in existing private schools, would yield a net gain in revenue to public schools on a per pupil basis.

During the second presidential debate Governor Bush responded to a question about racial profiling that made me rethink my approach to arguing my case for school choice. He characterized the disparity between public schools in the cities and those in the suburbs as a form of racial profiling. When he said this it suddenly occurred to me that the reason suburbanites cling to a false notion that vouchers take money away from public schools may be that they need it to mask their prejudice. Could it be that the anti-school choice movement is really about segregating the classes (rich and poor)?

Democrats have for years pushed for increased funding for the worst performing schools, those usually being in the inner cities. Today these schools receive 20 to 40% more money per pupil than suburban and rural schools yet have shown no increase in performance. Yet Democratic political candidates continue to demand more money to prop up these failing institutions. Maybe it's time for a different approach.

Few people realize that public schools got their start in the mid 1800s in part because of fervent anti-Catholic sentiment at the time. The potato famine was causing mass immigration of Irish who were settling in the Northeast. These Irish immigrants were setting up Catholic schools. Congressman James Blaine of Maine, a member of the nationalist 'Know Nothing' party, worried that these very successful schools might get some help in the form of government revenue. About the same time, Horace Mann, a Liberal Massachusetts state legislator and the 'father of American public education', developed the blueprint for our public schools. It took him 10 years to get his taxpayer funded public school legislation passed which included the stipulation that they be non-sectarian.

Today we have what are known as 'Blaine amendments' or 'Blaine language' in many of our state constitutions that forbid the use of public money for private purposes.

It was bigotry that created public schools and whether or not you have the courage to admit it, it's what keeps public education from being all that it was promised to be.

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