

Where does spending public money for private schools lead?

USA TODAY

February 19, 2002, Tuesday., FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS;

Length: 738 words

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Body

The national school-choice debate has finally reached the U.S. Supreme Court. The airwaves and opinion columns are filling up with constitutional commentary and arcane legal analysis. But readers need not despair. There is an easier way to frame all arguments, pro and con: Follow the money!

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court will do just that as it considers the constitutionality of an Ohio scholarship program that gives Cleveland's low-income and mostly minority children a chance to escape a public-school system renowned as the nation's greatest educational failure. The program offers participants vouchers worth up to \$ 2,500 to pay all or part of the tuition at a public, private or religious school of their choice, or for tutoring.

Opponents claim that by including religious schools, the program fosters religion. In essence, their argument is that the entire program is a sham, designed to line the pockets of the church. Follow the money, they say, and it will most likely lead you to a religiously affiliated school. This, they argue, is what the First Amendment forbids.

Proponents argue that 25 years of litigation to desegregate and reform Cleveland's public schools have been an abysmal failure and that it is time to give Cleveland's low-income parents some real control over the education of their children. Follow the money, they say, and it will lead to a parent who is satisfied that his or her child has real options, not empty promises about "reform" or desegregation "with all deliberate speed." Real options for minority children, they argue, are precisely what the equal-protection clause requires.

If we follow the money, the Cleveland case should be easy. After spending millions on a desegregation case that began in 1973 and ended in 1999, where is the money? Easy: The lawyers have it. After spending hundreds of millions more on education reforms, construction, staff assignments, a wholesale revamping of the school board and an average student-teacher ratio of 16:1, where is the money? Easy: The schools, their consultants and teachers have it.

Here's what the children have to show for the masses of money received by all of these adults, ostensibly on their behalf:

* Academic conditions in the schools are so appalling that the Ohio Education Department has rated the Cleveland City School District an "academic emergency" for three consecutive years.

* In 1999-2000, only 20% of Cleveland's ninth-graders passed all of the state proficiency tests. Statewide, 63% of their ninth-grade classmates can do so.

* Cleveland's public high schools had a graduation rate of only 33.7% in 2000. Statewide, the rate was 80.7%.

* Cleveland-area public schools are, in the words of one expert witness, "remarkably segregated." Inner-city parents who want their children to go to an integrated school are basically out of luck. Most of the integrated schools are in the private sector.

And even this does not come cheap: the out-of-pocket cost to the taxpayer during the 1999-2000 school year for Cleveland public schools was \$ 7,833 per pupil. The voucher costs only \$ 2,500.

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So what has the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and People for the American Way so exorcised? It can't be the welfare of three generations of Cleveland schoolchildren. Two generations of Cleveland's children have entered and exited a system that was more concerned about reforming itself than it was about educating its students. It certainly is not an abiding concern for school desegregation. The system is more segregated now than in 1973. It is not even a real concern about financing religious education: The record in the case shows that the private schools willing to accept vouchers are subsidizing the state.

Follow the money. In education, as in many other walks of life, money is power; those who control it make the rules.

Cleveland's low-income parents know this all too well. They and their children have been guinea pigs in a vast, failed, social experiment. It's time to stop. Ohio has decided to open the gates and let its low-income people go. The Supreme Court should do the same.

Robert Destro and Marshall Breger, both of the Columbus School of Law of The Catholic University of America, wrote the Supreme Court amicus brief filed by the independent Center for Education Reform.

Graphic

GRAPHIC, B/W, Keith Simmons, USA TODAY (ILLUSTRATION)

Load-Date: February 19, 2002