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School-Choice Flaws **by Sheldon Richman**

Some advocates of what is euphemistically called “school choice” argue that their reform would be a crucial step along the road to the separation of school and state. Some of us have dissented. Knowing how government works, we’ve had a hunch that vouchers and tuition tax credits would most likely lead to greater regulation of private schools. The cry of “accountability” for schools receiving “public money” would be irresistible.

Events are not only supporting our prediction; they are even worse than we might have expected. In Florida groups that support tuition tax credits for private schools have been lobbying, so far unsuccessfully, for legislation to impose standards on schools wishing to participate in the scholarship programs. Associations of private schools are in the forefront of the lobbying coalition. According to Jenny Rothenberg, a promoter of corporate tax credits in Tampa, the lobbyists’ efforts to have government adopt standards is a response to misconduct, including mismanagement and fraud, by three former scholarship-funding organizations. “Among the coalition’s accountability recommendations are required standardized testing for tax credit scholarship recipients and teacher qualification requirements that allow for formal education or special knowledge of the subject,” Rothenberg writes. The chairman of the new Florida Association of Scholarship Funding Organizations says, “Forming the association is giving taxpayers confidence that the program can operate under strong accountability practices.”

But isn’t something wrong here? School choice was supposed to shift decision-making power from government to parents, which would then make schools accountable to them rather than to bureaucrats. As Roy Cordato of the John Locke Foundation says, “I thought parents were supposed to be capable of choosing between good and bad private schools.” Something doesn’t add up if the scholarship organizations and schools are running to the government to define and enforce standards.

No doubt this is a public-relations move. Bad behavior gave the Florida movement a black eye, and it is seeking to rehabilitate itself. But enlisting the government is a bad idea. And another motive should not be ruled out, namely, that the schools lobbying for standards realize that any

bureaucratic burdens will be harder on smaller and not-yet-started schools than on larger established schools. It's common practice for people to use the government to stifle their competition.

As Rothenberg points out, school-choice advocates have turned to the government elsewhere. It happened in Wisconsin, where School Choice Wisconsin won so-called accountability legislation. The organization proudly brags that the law has “weed[ed] out schools that aren't ready for prime time but doesn't pose an unnecessary burden for other schools in the program.” In other words, politicians and bureaucrats, not parents, determine who may and may not offer education. That's the way to the separation of school and state?

One key to the puzzle is that most advocates of school choice do not want the separation of school and state. That makes the coalition for vouchers and tuition tax credits somewhat awkward, considering that its components want to move in different directions. How does that work exactly?

The school-choice movement offers yet another lesson in how not to roll back the power of government. In contrast, advocates of liberty should always proclaim their objectives and — very important — not look to the government for help. The idea that government could be removed from schooling by getting it to finance private-school tuition was always convoluted. Tuition tax credits escape one flaw in vouchers: they let taxpayers keep money that otherwise would be taken from. But they share another flaw: they too open the door to more regulation of private schools. It's unrealistic to think that won't happen. Now we know that the schools themselves will ask for it.

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