

No Shortcut to Accountability

The Supreme Court recently ruled that it is legal to use publicly funded vouchers to pay for children to attend private and parochial schools. Now some students who want to leave the public schools can use tax dollars to go elsewhere, although no voucher plan currently proposed will provide enough money to help every child who is trapped in a bad public school.

Those who know Parents for Public Schools (PPS) are not surprised that we are opposed to vouchers; our name suggests it. Yet we share common ground with many voucher supporters as we look at the conditions that would drive families out of the public sector and into private schools. We agree that time has run out for failing schools. But we differ in our choice for a more permanent and equitable solution.

PPS opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits and the like because they divert public resources—money, clout and commitment—from the public schools. They also let public schools and the communities in which they reside off the hook for the successful education of all their children.

PPS is not naïve about the state of public schools. We are in these schools everyday. Good public schools across the nation—and there are many—fuel our optimism as consumers. The bad ones fuel our persistence as change agents. And therein lies a solution to the problem. PPS believes that, as owners of the public schools, parents and citizens must take responsibility for addressing the toughest and most persistent problems their school districts face.

Failing schools are concentrated in our poorest neighborhoods. Vouchers offer a day trip out of the neighborhood, but they do nothing to fix the school or strengthen the community in which it resides. In fact they will have the opposite effect. And in the long run, this abandonment of community by withdrawing resources from a potential community anchor—the neighborhood school—will fortify the welfare state by cementing the residential divide between those who have resources and those who do not.

A quality public education in America is not a personal privilege, it is a community enterprise. If excellence can be provided for some students in the public schools, it can be provided for each of them. The best schools begin with one of two features: maverick leadership that is committed to and capable of delivering excellence or an engaged community that has assumed responsibility for demanding it. Where there is neither, national policy that assures accountability and action must be the catalyst.

When the free enterprise/market system model is applied to public education as national policy, the model assumes there will be winners and losers. Isn't that the problem we have now? Vouchers are tempting as immediate relief, but a quick fix for some may be tantamount to writing a check and walking away from a much deeper problem. Vouchers absolve the current public system of its accountability, and they don't necessarily guarantee it in the non-public options. Vouchers are an exit strategy, not from failing schools but from wrestling with the challenge of providing quality education that is accountable to the public.

Failing schools need dramatic interruption and intervention. There are no short cuts, but the longer road is navigable. It's a journey we must make together and, for citizens who really care about quality education for *all*, it begins with a single step through the front door of the troubled schoolhouse in your community. This is national policy at the grassroots.

Kelly Allin Butler is Executive Director of Parents for Public Schools, Inc., a national organization based in Jackson, Mississippi. **Margaret Hulbert** is a founding member of the Cincinnati, Ohio, chapter of Parents for Public Schools and serves as president of the PPS National Board of Directors. Both are public school parents.

Parents for Public Schools, Inc. 3252 North State Street Jackson, MS 39216 www.parents4publicschools.com 1-800-880-1222