

Improving K-12 education: What if we were all on the same side?

In any discussion about economic growth, prosperity or global competitiveness, all roads inevitably lead back to education.



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A billion or so people in China and India and hundreds of millions elsewhere are charging ahead in the race to offer an educated workforce to compete in world markets. We, the United States, are currently losing ground, yet it's a race we can't afford to lose.

Most people would agree that the nation's public schools are the first and weakest link in our efforts to compete in this new environment.

Or maybe the answer's not so obvious or simple as that. The recent state court decision in *Abbeville vs. South Carolina* highlights the importance of early childhood education, without which, the judge found, children living in poverty are denied the opportunity to receive "a minimally adequate education" as required by our state's constitution.

I give Gov. Mark Sanford and other state leaders a big "thumbs up" for acknowledging the general validity of the decision, and additional kudos to the governor for saying that, "Rather than appealing this ruling, we should focus our energies as a state on improving the quality of education for the students that need it most."

Which brings me to the question in the headline of this article, a question that applies not only in our state but around the country: What if we were all on the same side when it comes to improving K-12 education? To put it another way, what if we worked harder to bridge our differences and apply all our energies to the task of creating better outcomes for South Carolina's children?

The voucher 'litmus test'

Nationally, advocacy for or opposition to programs that allocate tax dollars to private school tuition has become an ideological lit-

mus test. The longest running voucher program is in Milwaukee, Wis. The Milwaukee program allows students from low-income families to attend any participating private school in the city at no charge if certain eligibility criteria are met. As everyone acknowledges, students living in poverty are the ones most likely to be attending failing public schools.

I did some research so I'd be more up-to-date on current developments on what advocates call the "school choice" issue. Not surprisingly, I found that if you start researching this subject on the Web, you have to figure out whether the Web site is "liberal" or "conservative" in its bias; whether it represents teachers or school board associations; and whether it is driven by a particular ideology or special interest.

Most Web sites I found fell in to one or more of these categories, so I took a look at Milwaukee's daily newspaper online (www.jsonline.com). Articles from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel site offered the best bet for getting something approaching an objective viewpoint on the city's voucher system.

The articles conclude that Milwaukee's program has been beneficial, both in providing an escape route for low-income parents desperate to get their kids out of failing schools and as a means of pushing the public school system to improve.

At the same time, during the 15-year life of this program, it has yet to deliver dramatic increases in individual student performance in either the public or voucher schools.

Lessons for South Carolina

As the *Abbeville vs. South Carolina* case suggests, we appear to have learned one lesson in South Carolina on our own—early childhood education is vital to academic success in K-12, especially for kids living in poverty. It will be a huge step forward if we take that lesson and apply it well throughout the state.

The lesson we should take from the Milwaukee experience is that if we want to create competition for the public schools system and create a potential safety valve for low-income parents concerned about the performance of their local public schools, a true

voucher system like Milwaukee's is the way to go. I also agree with Gov. Sanford that it's worth trying to craft a program to encourage the development of more charter schools around the state.

Another lesson from Milwaukee and other "choice" states comes to us as a warning: The creation of a half-baked, unregulated approach to school vouchers would be worse than no program at all. Wisconsin was careful to create a regulatory and oversight structure for the voucher program that minimizes fraud, waste and negligence and requires voucher schools to meet specified standards in exchange for benefiting from the expenditure of public funds.

The final lesson is we shouldn't be trying to create middle class private school subsidies through tax credits or vouchers. Public schools in South Carolina that enjoy the strong support of motivated middle class parents are often as good as or better than nearby private schools. A fiscally conservative approach to state spending on vouchers would focus on children living at or near the poverty line, not the middle class.

Divided we fall, united we stand

One of the biggest casualties of national politics over the last decade has been the near total loss of civility, comity and respect for the views of people elsewhere on the political spectrum. People who are sure they're right, whether conservative, liberal or moderate, are probably wrong to some degree. That goes for all the radio and TV news blabbermouths and celebrity authors who mock and disparage others whose views don't conform to theirs.

This ugly and foolish standoff prevents otherwise intelligent people from treating their differences as the starting point to search for solutions to the challenges facing our country. While we squabble, our global competitors are working hard to leave us in the dust.

In the context of improving K-12 education in South Carolina, we should be acting as if our economic lives and the future of our state depended on our ability to work together on this issue without rancor and with openness to other points of view. That's the way it is. I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year! 