

Opinion:

Blocking the exit door

Biggest victims of teachers unions' anti-choice crusade re minority kids

By Dr. Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Register, June 10, 2005

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, declared that racially segregated, "separate but equal" public schools were unconstitutional. Frustrated by the lack of progress in *Brown*, one year later - in a case that came to be known as "*Brown II*" - the Supreme Court declared that our public schools were to be desegregated "With all deliberate speed."

Today, a half-century later, almost nothing has changed. Our children are forcibly assigned to compulsory public schools based on where they live in a morally indefensible "ZIP code segregation" that reinforces patterns of racial segregation in housing. The Harvard Civil Rights Project has found little movement toward racial integration in our public schools since the 1950s, and has fingered "hypersegregation" in some states, including California. Worse still, the public schools to which we consign our poor and minorities are dysfunctional and violence-ridden dropout factories.

In our capital, Washington, D.C., our almost all-minority public schools are so decrepit that the number of senators and representatives willing to enroll their children in these schools can be counted on one hand - with fingers left over. Throughout the nation, public school teachers are giving up on government-run schools and sending their own children to private schools at far higher rates than the general public.

In 1963, it was Alabama Gov. George Wallace who stood in the schoolhouse door to block racial integration. Today, it is teachers union bosses who stand in the schoolhouse door to block the escape of poor minorities to a better life.

It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that the two shining stars in the nation of publicly funded voucher programs, those in Milwaukee and Cleveland, were established by African-Americans, nor is it a surprise that opinion polls show the strongest support for school choice among blacks and Hispanics. It is they, after all, who are the greatest victims of the public school monopoly, and it is they who are seeking justice.

In the granddaddy of all American educational voucher programs, the GI Bill of Rights, 250,000 African-American servicemen and women returning from the war attended college with GI Bill scholarships. Almost all were the first college graduates in their families.

Researcher Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute has demonstrated that today's private schools, even in the absence of an equalizing voucher program, are better racially integrated than public schools. While public schools undeniably have higher numbers of

racial minorities enrolled overall, the minorities are usually forced into almost all-black or all-Hispanic public schools, while public schools in places like Beverly Hills are almost all-white.

And researcher Paul Peterson of Harvard and others have shown that the voucher programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland are steadily closing the achievement gap between whites and minorities - while providing the competition that has spurred much improvement in the quality of the public schools in those cities.

Freedom of choice in education is the most crucial battle for civil rights of our century, just as was the battle for women's suffrage in the 20th century, the abolition of slavery in the 19th century and the American Revolution to establish a constitutional democracy in the 18th century.

We believe that the minority single mother who empties the wastebasket at night has the same right to a quality education for her child, and the same right to freedom of choice, as the big shot in the penthouse office. Giving that minority mom her rights to an education for her child is the unfinished mission of Abraham Lincoln.

It is now time for this nation, conceived in liberty, to dedicate itself to the proposition that it is the birthright of all American families, no matter the color of their skin or their standing in society, to choose a school that will give their children an education. We must now make that new birth of freedom of choice in education and that renaissance of racial equality a reality in our land, and we must do so with all deliberate speed.