

65 East Wacker Place • Suite 1620  
Chicago, Illinois 60601  
(312) 368-1066  
FAX (312) 368-1090



108 East Cook Street  
Springfield, Illinois 62704  
(217) 528-9200  
FAX (217) 528-7214

## Politics Over Kids (Again)

On Wednesday, May 5, 2010, the Illinois House of Representatives added another failure to the already dysfunctional record of state government in recent years. On that day, Senate Bill 2494, legislation seeking to establish a pilot voucher program as a means to deliver as many as 30,000 students from Chicago's worst performing and most overcrowded public schools, was voted down.

Why was it voted down? No opponent of the legislation ever argued that the public schools included in the voucher program were adequately educating children. In fact, a representative of the Illinois Education Association testified in the House Executive Committee that these schools *could not be worse!* And these opponents put forth no alternative legislation for improving Chicago's educational system.

So why was it voted down? The program's cost was built into Chicago Public School's existing budget, at no additional expense to taxpayers, and the constitutionality of vouchers and tuition tax credits have been affirmed in federal and Illinois courts.

So why was it voted down? Opponents attempted to spread the idea that private schools – particularly Catholic schools in the City of Chicago – were looking to use the voucher program to take only the best students out of Chicago public schools. However, the Church's support for this legislation, and its offer of tuition vouchers only to students enrolled in the worst-performing and most overcrowded schools, belies the charge.

So why was it voted down? The answer is politics. Teacher unions vigorously oppose any effort to provide school choice. The defeat of school choice legislation is, in the words of one legislator, "job protection for union leadership." And here are some telling numbers: \$79,182, \$91,482, \$119,371, \$130,254, \$111,125, \$55,561 and \$22,250. According to the State Board of Elections, these are the amounts of campaign contributions received by individual state legislators from teacher unions over various periods of their careers. Every election cycle, teacher unions are among the overall leaders in campaign contributions.

Now we know why.

It is important to note that neither political party can be solely blamed for this loss. The bill's primary sponsors in the House and Senate were Democrats. The bill passed in the State Senate with near unanimous support from Senate Republicans. The coalition supporting the bill included both Democratic House Speaker Mike Madigan and Republican Minority Leader Tom Cross. Support for the voucher program was truly bi-partisan.

No, the blame for failure must be laid at the feet of individual lawmakers and, in many cases, their prioritization of political support over real educational reform. Those too scared to rescue children from unsafe, underperforming, overcrowded schools in which the hope of the students are not merely good grades and a bright future, but, far too often, simply making it to the next day.

Conversely, State Senator James Meeks, State Representative Kevin Joyce and their bi-partisan group of supporters identified a serious problem, analyzed the factors involved and offered a meaningful policy solution in the face of stiff interest group opposition. This is the best we can expect from our elected officials. We should and must expect it more often; perhaps, as soon as next year.

Zach Wichmann  
Associate Director for Education  
Catholic Conference of Illinois