

Point of View

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TO BE EQUAL

SCHOOL VOUCHERS LOSING APPEAL

By John E. Jacob

When California's voters rejected a ballot proposal that would have given state-financed vouchers worth \$2,600 to the parents of every school child in the state, they signaled that the voucher option is an idea whose time has gone.

The voucher never made much sense, and they still don't.

The voucher ideas says education is subject to the same market forces as retailing or manufacturing: the schools will improve if they have to compete for customers.

That sounds good, but what

works in the private marketplace isn't always applicable to the distribution of public goods, such as education.

Vouchers subsidize private schools at public expense, instead of making public schools better they deprive them of funds while bribing the most involved and concerned parents to transfer their children out of the public schools.

This was so obvious that California's ballot proposition failed to win the support of many conservatives who were expected to solidly support the "choice" route to school reform.

Those conservatives were troubled by well-founded doubts that vouchers alone would assure educational excellence; by the fear of more state regulation of their private schools, and by worry that substandard schools would spring up to attract the subsidies.

The voters also recognized that vouchers would weaken the public school's historic and still critical role of binding people and communities together in today's multicultural urban setting.

The rush to embrace and subsidize private schools as a

precedent in our history. In the 1960's, fear of school integration spurred some southern communities to set up segregated private academies.

Georgia's voucher system—still on its books, although not implemented, — is a 1961 law that allows state subsidies to pay private school tuition, obviously intended to subvert integrated public schools.

Of course, many voucher plans came with antidiscrimination clauses and are sold as ways to give the poor people choice. But the ultimate, inevitable effect is to subsidize middle

class flight from the public schools and turn them into dumping grounds for the poorest children.

Many are that now. The waning enthusiasm for school vouchers should not be taken as an endorsement of the public schools' failure to educate those youngsters.

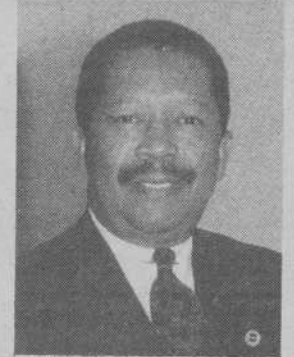
Reform is still urgently needed.

Some form of school choice options within the public system may be part of that reform, but we don't know until it's tried and very stringently studied. So far all we have is anecdotal support for the effectiveness of school choice.

Americans, especially those seduced by pro-voucher propaganda, should realize that real school reform will take resources and commitment.

Reform's starting place shouldn't be the fantasy of subsidizing the flight from public schools.

I believe the place to start

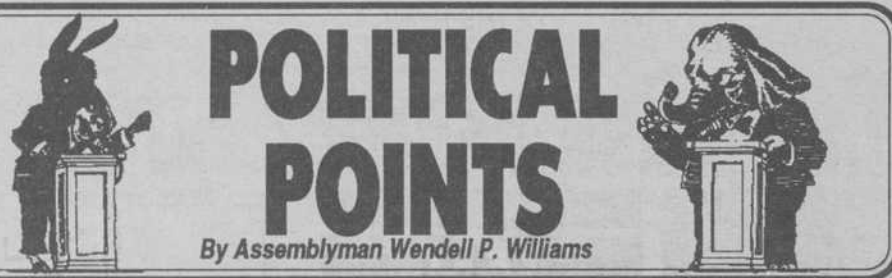


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real reform is to focus on the schools with the highest percentage of poor children. Those schools and the families whose children attend them should get whatever it takes to help them to perform at the highest levels and meet the highest standards.

That also means parents and community organizations must become deeply involved in our children's schools.

So for all the rhetoric, school reform hasn't even begun, because the most critical part of reform — helping poor children become high achievers — hasn't even been tried.



POLITICAL POINTS

By Assemblyman Wendell P. Williams

SOUL ON ICE

Much has been written and said about the number of African-Americans confined to prisons throughout America, especially African-American males. Many marvel at the numbers as they are recited over and over, about how over 25% of African American males are involved in the criminal justice system in some way.

The most astonishing factor about this issue is the fact that nothing serious is being done to address the great disparity that exists between the number of African-Americans in the overall population compared to the number of African-Americans that comprise the penal system.

Last week I participated in the 12th Annual Nevada Leadership Conference in Reno, Nevada. The conference focus was directed toward addressing the rapidly changing population makeup here in Nevada. Conference "experts" claimed that in just ten years Nevada's "minority" population will be the "majority."

Therefore, changes must begin now in education to keep pace with the increas-

ing diversity. More importantly, Nevada cannot afford to delay any longer a serious reform of its criminal justice system from top to bottom.

Let's take a look at the state of Nevada's Department of Prisons. As of this week the total number of people serving time in prison is 6,164. 92.3% of the inmates are males and 7.7% are females. 67% of the males are from Clark County and 64% of the females are from Clark County. In the area of offense distribution, the largest number of males are imprisoned for crimes of violence (35%). The second highest is property crimes, 23%, next are crimes involving drugs which make up 17% of all males in prison in Nevada.

Now in the area of ethnic distribution, white males make up 56% of the male prison population while African-American males constitute 31% of the entire Nevada male prison population. This number is high especially since African-American males are only about 4% of the total population in the state. African-American females make up 35% of the total female prison numbers, while white females are 57.3%. On last week when prison officials were asked

to give reasons why they thought the prison population comprised so many African-Americans compared to our population, but they refused to even speculate. Somebody is going to have to speculate what we are doing as a state now, will drive our society bankrupt.

A look at recidivism shows that 46% of the male prison population are people with one or more prior felony convictions. And 31% of women currently housed in Nevada prisons had prior felony convictions in the past. This shows a pretty good indication that many inmates upon leaving Nevada institutions tend to return.

Of the 6,164 inmates are currently serving a total of 10,702 separate sentences. 3,632 of these inmates have only one sentence. The other 2,532 inmates are serving a total of 7,070 consecutive sentences of the different types of offenses that inmates have been sentenced for, the largest number is 820 for burglary. The second largest is 704 sentences given. The 3rd highest number of sentences that people are serving sentences for is sexual assault which is 592 sentences, followed by lewdness with a minor at 319 sentences



Assemblyman
Wendell P. Williams

and trafficking controlled substances at 502. There are 848 inmates serving a total of 1,379 sentences of life with the possibility of parole. 529 have only one such sentence while 319 have two or more such sentences. On the other hand, there are 253 inmates serving a total of 431 sentences of life without parole. 125 of these have two or more such sentences which are consecutive to each other. In fact, there is one inmate that's serving 18 different sentences of life without parole.

The Department of prisons' average inmate population has increased from 1,843 in 1981 to 5,974 in 1993, an increase of 224%. Approximately \$178.4 million in general funds was given for 1991-93 to fund prisons. When will we realize that if we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we got. We have got to completely reform of criminal justice and do it now. Too often after inmates complete their sentences inside the joint, they begin new ones on the outside, by being locked out and not allowed a chance to try a new way.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Having just read an article, about Justice Clarence Thomas, written by Neil A. Lewis, (New York Times), printed in Las Vegas Sun, 11-30-93, I had a hard time believing this man was black. The article states that Justice Thomas was in conversation with two of his law clerks who were chosen by him because of their conservative views. Thomas said he intended to remain on the court until the year 2034, according to the clerk's account, explaining, "The liberals made my life miserable for 43 years, and I'm going to make their lives miserable for 43

years. After reading that statement by Justice Thomas, I was so incensed because Justice Thomas stated that liberals have made his life miserable for 43 years. First, let's define liberal, or liberalism." Webster's Dictionary, states that it is, (a) a generous person, (b) broad-minded, tolerant, (c) not bound by traditional forms, independence of mind, open minded, political philosophy based on belief in progress. Now after reading what liberalism means, Why in the world do politicians hide, and or run away from such a beautiful

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