

COMMENTARY

Reform Party views in line with Black America's on education

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Given that African-American children are overwhelmingly represented among the casualties of our nation's public school crisis, it is not surprising that Black parents are in the forefront of the movement championing charter schools and school vouchers.

Such options hold the promise of allowing parents of modest means to "shop around" and choose a good school for their children. They are tuition-free and open to all families.

Charter schools are public schools financed by taxpayers. They are independent and exempt from many state regulations. Parents and teachers run the schools and decide what is taught.

School vouchers are another way of giving parents more control over their children's education. Under these programs, parents receive vouchers equal to what it would cost the state to educate their children in public school and are allowed to use the vouchers to send their children to

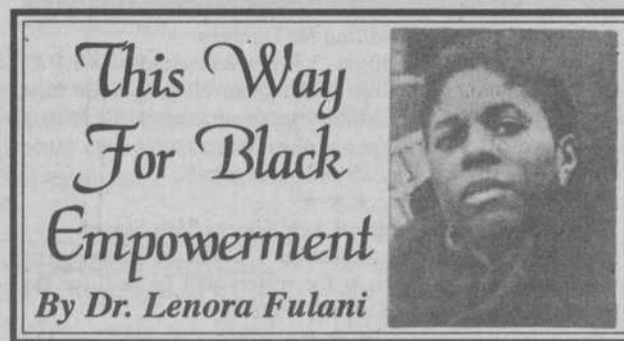
whatever school they wish, including private and religious schools.

Recent polls, including one conducted by Gallup for Phi Delta Kappa, a professional education association, shows non-white Americans are more supportive of these options than are white Americans.

For instance, while the general population split evenly — 48 percent for and 48 percent against vouchers — Black respondents voted 72 percent in favor of this alternative.

This preference runs counter to the Democratic Party's opposition to charter schools and vouchers. Republicans have been quick to exploit this "split" to embarrass Democrats.

Last fall, Texas Rep. Dick Arney, the House Republican leader, proposed a program of "opportunity scholarships" for 2,000 Washington D.C. students to escape the city's horrendous public school system for private schools. The proposal touched off a bitter partisan struggle, in which the interests of D.C.'s mostly Black student population were



relegated to the background.

Where do political independents stand on charter schools and vouchers?

Judging from a recent poll I conducted among members of the national Reform Party, the party lines up with the African-American community on these key educational reform issues.

As the chairman of the Reform Party's Education Platform committee, I was in charge of drafting educational proposals for consideration at the party's national convention in September this year.

Our committee designed a questionnaire to probe Reform Party members' attitudes on various educational issues. We tried to determine whether the rank and file of the Reform

Party agreed that our nation's schools are in crisis, and if so, what they thought we should do about it.

The poll revealed that respondents not only expressed strong concerns about the state of education in the United States, but also had a strong preference for some of the innovations — like charter schools and vouchers — currently being proposed as reforms.

Approximately 70 percent of respondents in the Reform Party poll said their own school district was either so troubled that it needed to be reconstructed or was troubled enough to require major reforms.

When viewing American public education in general, this percentage went up to 79 percent. Only 30 percent thought their community's

schools were "fine," or "generally worked well." For the American educational system in general, that percentage went down to 21 percent.

The question on support for charter schools revealed an area of consensus among respondents.

An overwhelming majority — 71 percent — supported the right of parents to organize charter schools. The reasons they gave for their support were wide-ranging and pragmatic: They believed charter schools would foster more parental involvement, or would allow for custom-building around local needs.

Many thought charter schools would create much needed competition in the public school system. Another popular opinion was that charter schools empowered local communities to take control of the education system away from government.

School vouchers were supported by 59% of the respondents, though the consensus was less strong than that for charter schools. About 32 percent opposed vouchers, 2 percent were undecided, and 3 percent said they did not have

sufficient information to decide.

A popular reason for supporting vouchers was the issue of equity: Reform Party members felt vouchers would give poor parents some of the options enjoyed by more affluent families.

Interestingly, among those opposed to charter schools and vouchers were many who feared these options would lead to fragmentation of the school system along class, racial or ethnic lines. These respondents tended to view the public school system as a "social leveler" — a homogenized force that was crucial to the maintenance of a common ideal of citizenship.

There may have been some truth to this in the past. But the public school system today — like the bipartisan political system of which it is a part — is actually reproducing and reinforcing that fragmentation. What our public education system, and our country, need at this point are some independent options.

Lenora B. Fulani is a leading activist in the Reform Party and chairs the Committee for a Unified Independent Party.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Clinton's nursing program wins not great, by default

Special to Sentinel-Voice

President Clinton wants more money — a total of \$167 million — next year for inspections of the nation's 17,000 nursing homes.

He says the extra funds are needed for surprise nighttime and weekend inspections that might reduce the neglect, mistreatment and abuse of elderly residents.

Even I get a momentary reaction that here we go again, ever expanding the involvement of the federal government into every area of life. However, I'm not really hostile to the president's request, although I admit to wondering why it is the federal government that must rein in the profit motive of many nursing home operators and chains.

In nurture for a fleeting moment the ideal of the American Health Care Association, which represents some 11,000 nursing homes, having its own investigators to police their facilities and ensure that patients get good, safe and friendly care.

But then I remember that my profession, journalism, is an absolute failure when it comes to policing itself, and I know that it's foolhardy to expect members of the nursing home industry to squeal on each other about untended gaping bedsores, patients left lying in their own feces, or staffers beating "troublemaker" residents.

Well, why can't the states do it?

The states' rights seem to be to take federal money for education, healthcare and many



CARL ROWAN

other things and use it according to local political whims rather than national standards. That is the case with regard to nursing home oversight. So Uncle Sam becomes inspector by default.

Then, why not let private inspectors oversee the quality of care in nursing homes?

The Clinton administration insists, probably correctly, that an inspector profit motive multiplied by a home operator profit motive is a formula for certain patient tragedy, far beyond the damage and deaths that now occur.

So I wind up supporting President Clinton's call for greater federal oversight, with one big caveat: I hope relatives and children don't get the idea that Uncle Sam can browbeat nursing home staffs into giving residents better and more compassionate care than they could get at home from relatives or that the feds can be a substitute for discreet but detailed inspections by the relatives of nursing home patients.

Many Americans may wish, as I do, that there were no need for 17,000 nursing homes. But millions of Americans are now living to such ripe old ages that their needs are more than some families can meet, even if we still had extended families.

A good nursing home with a caring staff, bolstered by federal funds, can be a saving grace for those aged but feeble and frail loved ones for whom we wish more than we alone can deliver.

We must hope that the new federal rules will produce truly good nursing facilities.

Violence prevention programs key to safety in nation's schools

By Marian Wright Edelman

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Drug Strategies, a Washington, D.C.-based research institute on whose board of directors I am proud to serve on, has just published an excellent report titled "Safe Schools, Safe Students: A Guide to Violence Prevention Strategies." I'd like to share with you some of its findings.

The report is a first-of-its-kind guide to school violence prevention programs designed to help increase student safety. Working with violence prevention experts from universities across the country, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools Program and others, Drug Strategies graded 84 violence prevention programs on a sliding scale, A, B, C, or D. Only 10 programs earned As; 49 got Cs or Ds. Obviously, there's work to be done.

Our schools must play a significant role in preventing the shocking school violence that has grabbed national attention in recent months in Springfield, Ore., Jonesboro, Ark., Edinboro, Penn., Paducah, Ky., and Pearl, Miss.

Every school district should examine the programs studied by Drug Strategies and the recommendations proposed by the group.

Vital ingredients for a successful violence prevention program include activities that change attitudes about violence and aggression; developing social and life skills; including families, peers, the media and the community in programs; creating a climate of learning via methods like school beautification projects; instilling confidence in school staff; curricula allowing students the chance to role play and take part in discussions; training to ensure

teachers administer programs properly; recognizing the types of violent behavior common to different age groups; racially and ethnically appropriate materials; and maintaining the program. At least 10 to 20 sessions are recommended during the first year; five to 10 sessions are adequate for the next two years.

Preventing violence, Drug Strategies warns, "requires changing norms."

This is difficult, but not impossible. Public opinion has changed minds before. No longer can people smoke at work, or get away with driving drunk or ignore wearing seat belts.

Society must begin to take a stand against violence. We must teach our children to control their anger, to imagine someone else's pain, to solve problems peacefully and to resist outside influences.

The report made the following recommendations for stopping student violence: decreasing class size; re-teaching and re-testing failing students; involving parents and the community in school activities and decisions; providing opportunities for students to help develop violence prevention programs; prohibiting students from leaving school during the day; requiring uniforms or dress codes; outlawing beepers, headphones and cellular phones; adding more lighting on school campuses, closing off stairways and hard-to-monitor doorways; removing locker doors; using more hall monitors; and installing metal detectors and surveillance cameras, if necessary.

Before school starts again in the fall, you might want to clip this column and send it to your local school board. Let's all work together to put a stop to the deadly violence taking our children's lives.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.