

# COMMENTARY: A tuition voucher tug of war

By Richard Goldkamp

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The latest chapter in the District of Columbia's tuition voucher tug of war began with a recent Wall Street Journal interview of White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel.

After reading "The President's Agenda," my imagination turned me into a White House media advisory crew member in good standing, with direct access to our chief of staff. I felt obliged to resurrect that interview in a broader context — at the risk of turning my first year into my only year with Team Obama. (Hey, sometimes you gotta live dangerously, right?) Here's what my memo said:

To the chief of staff from rjg:

You sure corrected the record in a hurry, Rahm, when that Journal Report interviewer started out by listing health care, climate change and financial regulatory reform as Mr. Obama's top domestic legislative priorities, seeking your reaction.

You hastily informed him you'd add "education reform" to that. Good point.

Frankly, I thought our health care debate was lasting so long that education would fade out of sight. But you brought the president's full agenda back to light. After all, he prodded Congress last spring to earmark \$90 billion for improving schools.

But Congress then voted to end a thriving, 5-year-old tuition voucher program for youngsters in Washington, D.C. And for no good reason: There were 1,700 students prospering academically in that program in Catholic and other religious and private schools.

Unfortunately, our beloved president remained aloof from it all, voicing no objection to Congress's decision. That hefty congressional fund, destined for government schools, allowed our president to redefine "education reform" to mean more federal control of education by directing where all those tax funds flow. Pardon me, Old Boy, but that isn't what's needed here. What we need is to open doors for parents to get more involved in their kids' schooling.

Forgive me for suggesting all this sounds like a federal usurpation of power from parents and local authorities, which is far from being a way to "transform America" in a (presumably) positive way, to borrow a favorite Obama phrase. Instead, a nasty little scandal has now hooked both the White House and our congressional leadership.

Fortunately, parents and students in the D.C. voucher program hit the streets with a massive protest on May 6 that prodded Mr. Obama to respond. Yet all he did was ask Congress to allow students already in the program to complete high school before ending it. That still left other families out in the cold. It's why the activist group, D.C. Parents for School Choice, launched a tenacious push ever since to reignite a

voucher plan that was working well. They don't need any more Washington double talk to explain away that program's demise.

Remember: The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship voucher plan was meant to benefit low-income African-American and Hispanic families. Just the kind of people many Americans thought their president had in mind when he started talking school reform.

And don't forget that a U.S. Department of Education study itself showed reading skills decidedly improving under the voucher plan. The orderly atmosphere in their new classrooms was helping students, many of whom left a disruptive atmosphere behind in their previous schools.

A little history will shed more light here, Rahm. The tuition voucher idea got its biggest shot in the arm when a handful of Catholic activists banded together in St. Louis in the late 1950s to form Citizens for Educational Freedom. Its purpose was to defend a longtime church principle that parents are their children's primary educators, and should have a right to choose religious and other private schools if they wished.

CEF's arrival on the scene was hardly a coincidence. Many U.S. Catholics were familiar with the anti-Catholic bias in those infamous Blaine amendments that invaded so many state constitutions after the Civil War. The nativist Know Nothing movement did its best to isolate Catholic immigrants and their schools from the rest of America. They were labeled "sectarian." That term of contempt wasn't leveled at other religious groups, nor even at Protestant religious practices used in some public schools.

Spurred by President Ulysses S. Grant's flawed guidance, those state amendments generally barred the use of tax funds to sectarian (read "Catholic") religious schools by forbidding communities to use tax money on nonpublic schools. Grant clearly assumed the U.S. Constitution did not routinely ban such funds for use in religious schools.

There are other reasons to encourage our Pres to push for an extension of the D.C. program. When an omnibus bill passed in December brushed the voucher issue aside, bipartisan support began pushing in Congress to review and revive the D.C. plan sometime early this year.

There's also a 2002 case when a tuition voucher plan at work in Cleveland passed muster with our Supreme Court, which came remarkably close to matching the Catholic Church's defense of parents as primary educators of their children. In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the court held not only that the vouchers in use were constitutional, but ruled parents could choose religious schools if they wished, since Cleveland's program stayed neutral toward religion. One result of the *Zelman* case was an upswing in the number of voucher programs showing up around the country since then.

The Supreme Court agrees. In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* in 2002, the court not only held that a tuition voucher plan in Cleveland was firmly constitutional but also ruled parents could choose religious schools if they wished, since Cleveland's program stayed neutral toward religion. One result of the *Zelman* case has been an upswing in the number of voucher programs showing up around the country since then. That court decision, in many ways, almost echoed the CEF principle defending the key role parents must play in the education of their children.

It's not only time for congressional legislators to recognize those D.C. voucher students are as much a part of the human family as their own children, and deserve the same chance at a good education. The D.C. plan is also a golden opportunity to help end the stereotyping of certain schools as "sectarian," a label that hides a subtle form of anti-religious bigotry still lingering among rigid church-state separationists in the school-choice debate.

The Wall Street Journal recently praised Virginia and New Jersey for naming two strong school choice advocates to run their states' education departments. If you recall, GOP governors were just elected in both states by reversing the voter support our president earned there in late 2008. Maybe it's time we got the big picture.

As our in-house expert, Rahm, you're good at turning a crisis to our advantage. Isn't it time to show Mr. Obama why this ongoing D.C. voucher scandal is a crisis too terrible to waste? Reviving that voucher project could create a whole new benchmark for school reform to help families across America.

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