

March 10, 2007

COMMENTARY

The March Is Not Over

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Last Sunday, Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton commemorated the 42nd anniversary of the civil-rights march across the Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. While praising the pioneers of the civil-rights movement, the two senators told church congregations that the march was not over.

I agree. My own journey to provide quality education for inner-city children began in Little Rock, Arkansas, and continues in Washington, D.C., today. Fifty years ago, Gov. Orval Faubus, a white Democrat, stood in the doors of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas and blocked black students from entering the school. Faubus's defiance came after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the "separate but equal" educational system for whites and blacks was unconstitutional.

Faubus's efforts in 1957 to preserve educational apartheid were squashed when President Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, stood with the parents and children and ordered the 101st Airborne Division to escort nine black students to school. Ten years later, my sister and I graduated from Little Rock Central High School, and my father was the first black assistant superintendent of the Little Rock public-school system.

Since then, our educational system has become segregated again. Inner-city schools haven't been educating children, and for years, test scores have fallen despite increased spending. Families with money (including Sens. Obama and Clinton) have exercised school choice by sending their children to better, private schools in the city -- or moving to the suburbs and leaving mostly low-income, minority families in failing schools.

To help these families, a few years ago President Bush and a Republican Congress proposed \$15 million in government-funded opportunity scholarships for Washington, D.C. At that time, the National Assessment of Education Progress test results showed that only 10% of D.C.'s fourth graders were proficient readers, and 76% performed below grade level in math.

D.C. Parents for School Choice, Mayor Anthony Williams, D.C. public school board president Peggy Cooper Cafritz, D.C. city council member and chair of the council's education committee Kevin Chavous, and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.) all supported the proposal. Black "leaders" such as Jesse Jackson and D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton stood with the unions and their money and chose to leave the children behind.

Senate Democrats Ted Kennedy and Dick Durbin vowed to filibuster the bill, and Sens. Mary Landrieu (D., La.) and Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), two previous supporters, switched

their positions and opposed the measure. Our small group of vocal parents, President Bush, Congressional Republicans, and other coalition partners stood up for the parents, and after a long legislative battle, Mr. Bush signed the legislation that allowed our children to escape these failing schools.

Now in its third year, more than 6,500 families have applied for the 2,200 government-funded scholarships that have been awarded. For the school year 2006-2007, more than 1,800 students are receiving opportunity scholarships worth \$7,500 for tuition, transportation, school supplies and uniforms at the private school of their choice.

The 66 schools in the program have welcomed the children and families, set high expectations and provided a safe and supportive environment where the children can learn. Most of the families have chosen to send their children to neighborhood schools, but some families have chosen Georgetown Day and Rock Creek International School, where their children learn next to the children of U.S. senators and diplomats. These schools, whose normal tuition exceeds the \$7,500 voucher limit, have not charged the families more than that.

The program is an outstanding success. One second-grade girl is learning two foreign languages and hopes to be a translator one day. Another parent reports that her once-shy son is now confident and flourishing in his new school because his teacher cares for him. The program has impacted the parents as well: One mother says her daughter's new attitude and success has motivated her to get her own GED. Another father who didn't want his son to "end up like me" is now clean and sober and enrolling in a technical training school.

The journey for more than 2,200 children, parents and families who have received school vouchers is just beginning. But like the previous generation of civil-rights leaders, we have not achieved our goals. Under current law, the D.C. opportunity scholarship program is scheduled to end on Dec. 31, 2008, which is the middle of school year 2008-2009. Democratic activists and politicians have promised to kill this program and, ultimately, our hopes and opportunities.

Black families have overcome educational segregation before. With the help of Republicans in 1957 and 2003, we broke through the doors. Will the Democrats who now control Congress end our journey by sending us back to failing schools?

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