

OPINION: LET PARENTS CHOOSE

Posted on November 14, 2021 by John Stossel



As Virginia's gubernatorial election drew to a close last week, Democrat Terry McAuliffe brought in teachers' union president Randi Weingarten.

He thought that would help?

I suppose he, like many progressives, believes everyone thinks the way he does.

"I'm not going to let parents come into schools and ... make their own decisions," he'd said. "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach."

That's the political attitude: Government runs things. We, the experts, know what's best. Parents as "customers" who make choices? Nonsense.

I hope his defeat means Americans are figuring out that such politicians are enemies of progress.

Years ago, I was surprised to discover that NYC's failing public schools spent \$20,000 per student. Teachers had been holding protests where they shouted: "Fund schools! We don't have enough money!"

But they spent \$20,000 (now nearly \$30,000) per student! At 25 students per class, that's \$500,000 per classroom! Think what you could do with that money: hire five good teachers?

Where did the money go? No one in the bureaucracy had a good answer. Governments make money ... disappear.

I researched different education systems and did an ABC TV special called "Stupid in America." It showed how American students do worse than kids in other countries.

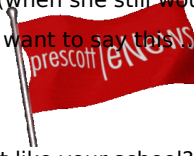
I suggested that parental choice would help. After all, competition brought us better phones, cars, supermarkets, etc., while holding prices down. Competition forces providers to constantly try new things to please their customers. But not in government schools.

This year, most private and Catholic schools opened, while "public" (government-run) schools often stayed closed.

Monopolies kill innovation. When public schools began, most Americans worked on farms. That's why schools took a summer break, so kids could help on the farm. Today, fewer than 2% of us work on farms, yet nearly every government school still takes the summer off.

"Unionized monopolies like yours fail," I told Weingarten (when she still would speak to me). "It is the children who you are failing." "We are not a unionized monopoly!" she snapped. "Folks who want to say this... don't really care about kids."

But I do care about kids.



Of course, government-run schools are a monopoly. Don't like your school? Tough. School is terrible? Tough. Your taxes fund that school regardless of whether it's good or bad.

Suppose we bought groceries that way: no more supermarkets offering choices. We vote on whether we want meat or fish. Whichever wins -- that's what everyone eats.

When I interviewed Weingarten, I pointed out that civil service and union rules meant it could take 10 years to fire a bad teacher. "We'll police our own profession," she said.

"I'd like to police my job, too," I responded. "But that's not how it works in life!"

Apparently, I was wrong. When it comes to public education, it's still how things work.

After "Stupid in America" aired, and millions watched, Weingarten held a protest outside my office. Hundreds of teachers carried signs, and shouted, "We are here to demand an apology from '20/20's' John Stossel!"

I surprised them by coming out of the ABC building to let them yell at me personally. Teachers told me I'd insulted them. Some said (probably correctly) that I had no clue how hard their jobs were.

So, Weingarten came up with a plan to educate me. "Teach for a week!" she shouted at me, through the loudspeaker. "We've got high schools; we've got elementary schools."

The teachers liked that idea. They started chanting, "Teach, John, teach!"

I think I surprised them again by saying, "OK!"

I would have taught in any classroom they picked. I wanted to videotape it.

But then they showed their bureaucratic nature. After repeatedly rescheduled meetings, they decided that I would not be allowed to teach.

Children are too important to be entrusted to unions or government monopolies. Competition, parental choice, would bring innovation that will make schools much better.

After Glenn Youngkin won the race for governor, he said, "We're going to introduce choice within our public school system."

If he does it, it's about time.

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