

Circling the wagons

Think education is Priority One for the National Education Association? Think again: It's fighting school choice

By LYNN VINCENT

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When National Education Association delegates gathered in Orlando over the July 4th weekend, a congregation of 10,000 educators united against one evil: school vouchers. For four days, from a pulpit raised above a carnival of banners, buttons, and balloons, a succession of anti-voucher orators hurled down fire and brimstone designed to rally weary soldiers and cause slackers to repent.

Vouchers are like "applying leeches and bleeding a patient to death," preached NEA president Bob Chase in his keynote address. "The most able students-the few that private schools are willing to accept-will leave the school.... So will many teachers who resent being stigmatized with that scarlet F."

At an anti-voucher rally on Independence Day, Florida State Sen. Buddy Dyer continued the litany, castigating Florida's "new voucher governor" Jeb Bush: "Over and over I keep getting the same question: Why? ... And all I can come up with is this: politics and greed."

Then came a moment of almost spiritual unity among the anti-voucher faithful: After the last rally speaker had denounced the threat posed by allowing parents the freedom to choose their children's education, 10,000 NEA delegates held hands, raised them above their heads and sang "We Shall Not Be Moved."

"It was like a revival meeting," says Mike Antonucci, noting that those listening to the anti-voucher rhetoric had heard it all before. But Mr. Antonucci, who heads the California-based research firm Education Intelligence Agency, says that, besides the simple fact of union opposition, vouchers serve another purpose for the NEA: "Vouchers are a unifier that keeps NEA members holding the line together. It's difficult for the union to generate that kind of enthusiasm on other issues. But on vouchers, there's no room for a nuanced position. Vouchers are the Bogeyman and must be defeated."

In Orlando, the NEA Representative Assembly-the union's version of Congress-spent considerable time retooling the battle plan it hopes will kill vouchers, and all other forms of school choice, for good. One 1999-2000 resolution adopted by the Assembly reads like a paramilitary execution order: "The following programs and practices are detrimental to public education and must be eliminated." Three of the six "deleterious programs" listed-tax credits, vouchers, and privatization-involve school choice.

In its furious war on school choice, never has the NEA had to fight on so many fronts. School-choice activists have launched publicly and privately funded voucher programs in more than 60 cities, according to Fritz Stieger of CEO America, a Texas-based foundation that funds private vouchers. Florida's Governor Bush signed into law the nation's first statewide voucher program earlier this year. And even voucher programs knocked for a loop by litigation repeatedly live to fight another day. Case in point: the resilient Cleveland Scholarship Program (CSP).

The NEA, the American Civil Liberties Union, and others had filed suit against CSP on the grounds that the program carried the primary effect of advancing religion. When a federal judge on Aug. 24 suspended the program, leaving more than 3,000 publicly funded voucher students stranded one day before school was to start, the NEA cheered. But three days later, the judge dissolved his injunction and CSP was, at least temporarily, back in business.

In all, five new business items at the Assembly were designed to combat school choice. Two reflected union alarm over growing support for vouchers among minority families. In Cleveland, where voucher kids are 80 percent minority, satisfaction is high. Even adjusting for the "Hawthorne effect," which says that satisfaction levels decrease as the shine wears off a new experience, a Harvard survey released in June indicates that voucher parents are more likely to be "very satisfied" with nearly every aspect of the school they attend than are parents of students in Cleveland public schools. NEA's New Business Item 25 is designed to change all that.

That item provides for "membership training in the issues of vouchers ... especially targeting ethnic minority communities, so that NEA members can inform all community members of the threat [of vouchers] to public education." The union has been busy. When 800 students in San Antonio left the Edgewood district's public schools last year to take advantage of privately funded vouchers, the NEA deployed a strike team.

In Edgewood, national union representatives met with parents, teachers, and administrators at a district high school. What was said? The public does not know: After about 100 community members arrived, NEA officials asked the only reporter present to leave, and then locked the public school doors.

"NEA is spending a lot of time trying to come up with arguments that will dissuade minorities from supporting vouchers," says Mr. Stieger. "But these arguments just don't resonate any longer because these parents can see for themselves that inner-city schools are so atrocious." Specific minority "outreach" arguments relate to cost (vouchers won't cover tuition costs at a private school), equal access (elite private schools discriminate against minority students), and educational strip-mining (public schools will be stripped of "advantaged" students, leaving minority students stuck in schools with diminished resources).

The NEA this year budgeted \$142,000 to beef up its own mining effort-the data mining it conducts on activities of the "far right." The NEA Assembly's New Business Item 32 calls for the investigation of

"organizations, corporations, and recognized individuals" that support vouchers. The NEA's data-mining efforts are military in their language and precision, says Mr. Antonucci, adding that "right-wing intelligence briefings" are a standard agenda item at union executive meetings: "Whenever a voucher bill comes up in a state legislature, NEA considers it an extremist act."

But even NEA's own members, though perhaps not opposed philosophically to the union voucher stance, aren't much help on the front lines. According to some union officials, grass-roots involvement in union activities is at its lowest ebb in memory.

Rhonda Martinez, a third-grade teacher in a San Diego Christian school, observed as much while teaching in a Covina Valley, Calif., public school. Ms. Martinez, not a union member, says vouchers and other school-choice initiatives were not a topic in the teacher's lounge and prep room, even among her union colleagues: "We were too busy discussing children's reading levels, or how we could improve performance for this student or that student." That's why the NEA will spend about a half million dollars this year to teach its members voucher activism and strategies to "combat extremist groups."

All told, the Representative Assembly budgeted about \$2 million specifically to fight vouchers. That amount nearly equals the union's official annual political action committee (PAC) contributions, but it's just a downpayment on what the national union could invest: The NEA wields a \$200 million war chest filled by dues and assessments on more than 2 million members. State union affiliates (like the California Teachers Association) each year transmit \$116 per member to the NEA national offices.

In turn, the national union stirs the money pot and, much like the federal government, sends a portion of those funds back out to state unions according to their needs. Among those needs: political action. The national union regularly infuses state-level school-choice battles with supplementary cash, both in the form of direct funding and through reimbursements to state affiliates who wage costly fights against ballot initiatives.

In Washington State, for instance, the NEA provided a \$410,000 cash infusion to help the state affiliate fight two school-choice battles in 1996. A conservative watchdog group lawsuit against the Washington Education Association spotlighted the transaction, but last week failed in its goal of having the WEA classified as a political action committee, which would have required the union to make public disclosure of all its political activities. The state superior court judge in the case determined that the WEA spent more than \$550,000 on politics in 1996, but that-2 percent of the union's total budget-was not enough to make it a PAC. The union did settle with the state attorney general for a \$430,000 fine for numerous campaign-finance-reporting irregularities.

The NEA also employs the judiciary as an anti-voucher battleground. Current NEA policy calls for the union to challenge as unconstitutional any school-choice initiative-automatically and regardless of a measure's provisions or projected fiscal impact on public education. Would the NEA even weigh the potential merits of any tax credit or voucher program before hauling it into court? Not according to

NEA spokesperson Becky Fleischauer: "The assumption is that public schools would lose money, because that's been the case under every scheme that's been constructed to date."

For NEA strategists, the voucher war all comes down to money, says Mr. Stieger-not equal access for all students or student performance, as the NEA contends. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 83 cents of every public-education dollar goes to salary and benefits for education workers. The NEA is a labor union (not an education policy group as a sympathetic press has often painted it). It will, says Mr. Antonucci, continue to marshal its members' money to keep as much of that 83 cents as it can.

But, despite NEA's deep pockets, Mr. Stieger does not believe money will carry the day in the school-choice debate. Parents, he said, want "the financial means to choose for their children a quality education." The parental push, he stressed, "is much more powerful than all the money the teachers unions can spend to stop it."