

Chelsea Clinton and the D.C. Schools

Early in 1993 the editorial page at the Washington Post invited comment on the Clintons' choice of private school for their daughter. I sent this (which the Post did not print). You know what happened later. – Ted Kolderie

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A columnist in Saint Paul, reading the Post's report about the Clintons' decision to send their daughter to private school, objected less to the decision itself than to the reasons given for it. Why, the columnist asked, didn't they just say the D.C. schools are awful?

He seems not to have been alone in this opinion. Other columnists, too, pointed to studies making it clear the Clintons could hardly have been faulted if they had rested their decision on educational quality.

But that would have led to a discussion about improving the quality of public education in the District. And this, unhappily, seems something the civic leadership in the District has decided it cannot do. More than one organization has tried, more than once. All have been stonewalled by the existing system. Why send in one more report urging 'better management'?

Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, did suggest, in his New York Times column January 10, "bringing together the union, the school board and the parents" to "fix the Washington schools" so everybody will want to go to them. But that doesn't quite get us there either, does it?

There is another approach that might work.

It's been fascinating to ask people in Washington these past two years, who are concerned about the schools, "Why don't you just let somebody else offer public education in the District?"

There's always a pause, while they realize you said "public education". So you explain.

Most everywhere else, if the local system isn't working, people go to their Legislature to get things changed.

Washington could, too. Section 601 of the 1973 Home Rule act says: "The Congress reserves the right at any time to exercise its constitutional authority as legislature for the District by enacting legislation for the District on any subject, within or without the scope of legislative power granted to the Council by this act."

So why not ask Congress to authorize the Department of Education, say, or one of the federally chartered universities in the District, to sign agreements with organizations that want to start new and different and better public schools?

The District does not lack for educational resources, from the Smithsonian to the military (the latter, incidentally, a meritocratic institution and probably way ahead of the public schools in its use of electronic technology for learning).

These schools would offer public education: non—sectarian, no tuition, no discrimination, not selective (no picking and choosing ‘nice kids’). They would be held to performance outcomes. They would be financed either with a new appropriation or with funds withdrawn from the federal payment to the District.

But everyone gasps, “Oh, we couldn’t possibly do that.” Democrats do; Republicans too. “Politically unrealistic,” say the Conservatives. “An attack on Home Rule”, say the liberals: “presumptuous”, “elitist”. People in Congress are pragmatic: “We enacted Home Rule to get us out of questions like this.”

It’s clear what everybody is really saying: “A whole set of adult interests would be very opposed to the idea of Congress letting somebody else offer public education in the District. And we aren’t prepared to challenge those adults.”

You say: “I thought this was about improving education for kids.” They say: “I just noticed I’m late for a meeting.”

Try it sometime: See for yourself.

In fairness, this is not unique to Washington. Everywhere the impulse is to try to “fix” the existing organization with more money, ‘better management’, some internal reorganization or a new superintendent. People find it hard to go to fundamentals; hard to think in terms of what causes organizations to work well. And there is a prejudice against simple solutions: Letting somebody else offer public education seems too obvious.

But the existing arrangement cannot work. Essentially it amounts to exhorting and expecting the schools to do hard things that will generate internal stress, while guaranteeing them their students, their revenues, their jobs, their security -- their success - - whether they do these things or not. This is not smart: It tells adults they can take the kids for granted; which means they can put their own interests first. Whose fault is it, then, if they do exactly that?

What is most disappointing about Washington is the failure of those who do care about the schools and about the kids to think through to the fundamentals; to think strategically. And their lack of courage. Asking Congress to let somebody else offer public education within the District would be controversial. But that’s not a reason not to act . . . is it?