



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
CN 500
TRENTON, N.J. 08625-0500

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

May 17, 1994

New Jersey State Library

TO: Deputy Commissioner
Assistant Commissioners

FROM: Leo Klagholz
Commissioner *LK*

SUBJECT: Voucher Pilot

Attached is a refined version of the comments I presented at the NJSBA-sponsored debate of the proposed Jersey City voucher pilot. The paper describes my current position on the issue.

By copy of this memo, I am sharing a copy of the paper with Frank Esposito to serve as his general charge.

LK/pp:4/508
Attachment
c: Frank Esposito

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VOUCHERS

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN BY SAYING THAT, BEING THE DIPLOMAT THAT YOU ALL KNOW ME TO BE, I AGREE WITH ALL OF THE PREVIOUS SPEAKERS.

I AGREE WITH MS. ROSENBERG THAT WE NEED TO REFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION. I AGREE WITH MAYOR SCHUNDLER THAT WE ALSO NEED TO BE OPEN TO EXPLORING INNOVATIVE ALTERNATIVES. AND I AGREE WITH CONGRESSWOMAN ROUKEMA THAT WE MUST BE PRAGMATIC ABOUT THE VOUCHER ISSUE, NOT IDEOLOGICAL. THESE THINGS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

FORTUNATELY, THERE MAY BE ENOUGH MONEY AVAILABLE TO DO ALL OF THEM SIMULTANEOUSLY. IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO USE PART OF THE \$10,000 PER-PUPIL THAT WE CURRENTLY SPEND ON PUBLIC EDUCATION TO FUND A STUDENT'S NONPUBLIC SCHOOL TUITION -- SAY \$3,000. WE COULD TAKE AWAY ANOTHER AMOUNT FOR TRANSPORTATION -- PERHAPS \$1,000. AND WE COULD USE THE BALANCE OF \$6,000 TO REFORM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR THOSE STUDENTS WHO CHOOSE TO REMAIN IN THEM.

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IN ANY EVENT, I BELIEVE THAT THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S POSITION ON THIS MATTER IS A REASONABLE AND PRAGMATIC ONE:

WE SHOULD ALLOW THIS CONCEPT OF A VOUCHER PILOT IN JERSEY CITY TO BE FLESHED OUT AND SUBJECTED TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY. IF IT PASSES THE TEST, WE SHOULD ALLOW IT TO BE TRIED IN A COMMUNITY THAT: 1) WANTS TO TRY IT; AND 2) HAS A SCHOOL DISTRICT THAT HAS BEEN FUNCTIONING POORLY ENOUGH TO WARRANT A STATE TAKEOVER -- IN EFFECT, THERE HAS BEEN A LEGAL DETERMINATION THAT THE STUDENTS THERE ARE NOT EVEN GETTING THEIR CONSTITUTIONAL DUE.

OBVIOUSLY, WE MUST DO MANY THINGS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN IN JERSEY CITY AND THROUGHOUT THE STATE. A VOUCHER PILOT WOULD BE JUST ONE. BUT, BECAUSE IT CHALLENGES BASIC STRUCTURES AND ASSUMPTIONS, A VOUCHER PILOT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO YIELD SUBSTANTIAL BENEFITS. IT REPRESENTS MORE THAN JUST TINKERING WITH THE STATUS QUO.

ARE THERE RISKS? ABSOLUTELY. THERE ARE ALWAYS RISKS WHEN YOU TRY TO IMPROVE, BECAUSE IMPROVEMENT REQUIRES CHANGE AND CHANGE CAN BE UNPREDICTABLE.

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BUT, THE IDEA OF A PILOT PROJECT IS INTENDED TO CONTROL AND MINIMIZE RISKS. WE ARE NOT SUPPORTING THE HASTY OR WHOLESALE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IDEA. WE ARE ONLY SUPPORTING AN OPENNESS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A LIMITED PILOT WITH RESPONSIBLE CONTROLS. LIKE ALL RESPONSIBLE EXPLORATIONS IT WILL HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS. IT WILL PROVIDE NECESSARY ASSURANCES OF EDUCATIONAL, FISCAL, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SOUNDNESS. IT WILL HAVE A DEFINED LIFE SPAN. AND, IT WILL HAVE CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF ITS SUCCESS OR FAILURE.

I'M NOT CONCERNED THAT A VOUCHER PLAN WILL SEGREGATE STUDENTS. NATIONAL REPORTS SHOW THAT NEW JERSEY'S EXISTING SYSTEM OF 600-PLUS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS IS ALREADY ONE OF THE MOST SEGREGATED IN THE NATION. THERE IS NOTHING MORE SEGREGATIONIST THAN COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE AT A NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL IN AN ENTIRELY SEGREGATED SYSTEM OF EDUCATION. IF ANYTHING, CHOICE PROGRAMS MAY HELP TO DESEGREGATE.

IN THIS CASE, I'M FRANKLY MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE OPTION OF NOT TRYING TO CHANGE DRAMATICALLY. WHAT WE'RE CONSTRUCTIVELY CHALLENGING IN JERSEY CITY IS NOT EXACTLY THE NOBLE IDEAL OF THE 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN COMMON SCHOOL. WHAT WE'RE CHALLENGING IS

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NOT THE PUREST EMBODIMENT OF A FREE, HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL STUDENTS.

INSTEAD, WE'RE CHALLENGING THE APPLICATION OF 19TH CENTURY SYSTEM THAT NO LONGER WORKS IN A MODERN URBAN SITUATION. IN TOO MANY CASES, IT IS A SYSTEM THAT SENTENCES STUDENTS TO AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS NEITHER CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING NOR EVEN TO PHYSICAL SAFETY. AT ITS WORST, THAT ENVIRONMENT SYSTEMATICALLY VICTIMIZES STUDENTS AND MAY ACTUALLY DRAW THEM TOWARD A DESTRUCTIVE LIFESTYLE OF DRUGS AND VIOLENCE.

I THINK THAT ONE OF THE REASONS WE'RE COMFORTABLE WITH THAT FACT, HERE IN PRINCETON, IN RELATION TO OUR OWN PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS, IS THAT THESE STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS ARE POOR AND POWERLESS.

MAYBE WE'RE TOO COMFORTABLE WITH ASKING THEM TO WAIT -- LITERALLY AN INDIVIDUAL LIFETIME -- FOR THE NEXT REFORM OF URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION. IF I WERE THEY, HAVING BEEN ASKING THE SAME THING FOR DECADES, I WOULD NOT HAVE MUCH HOPE.

THESE PARENTS AND STUDENTS DON'T CARE ABOUT LONG-RANGE REFORM INITIATIVES OR NATIONAL ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT. THEY WANT TO CHANGE THEIR LIVES, AND THEY WANT TO CHANGE THEM NOW.

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MAYBE WE SEE THESE PARENTS AND STUDENTS TOO MUCH AS MEANS TO THE END OF PRESERVING OUR OWN PHILOSOPHICAL IDEALS, OUR INSTITUTIONAL TRADITIONS AND OUR OWN PROFESSIONAL SELF-INTEREST.

WHAT IS THERE TO LOSE? IS IT THAT WE MIGHT JEOPARDIZE THE IDEA OF THE COMMON SCHOOL? I BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE LOST SIGHT OF OUR MISSION WHEN INSTITUTIONS AND CONCEPTS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN STUDENTS LIVES.

IN FACT, THERE IS LITTLE TO LOSE. AS IN ANY RESPONSIBLE EXPLORATION OF CHANGE, WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE OUTCOME OF A VOUCHER PILOT WILL BE. BUT, WE DO HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF KNOWING THE OUTCOME OF NOT CHANGING. PERHAPS OUR ONLY GUARANTEE IS THAT STUDENTS WILL NOT BE SERVED LESS WELL UNDER A VOUCHER PILOT THAN THEY ARE NOW BEING SERVED.

AND, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT PARTICIPATION WOULD NOT BE MANDATORY. ALL WE WOULD BE GIVING THESE FAMILIES IS THE RIGHT TO MAKE A CHOICE. THEY MIGHT CHOOSE TO DO NOTHING DIFFERENT. BUT, THEY ALSO WOULD BE EMPOWERED BY FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO MAKE A DECISION THAT IS NOW BEYOND THEIR REACH -- THE KIND OF POTENTIALLY LIFECHANGING DECISION THAT THOSE OF US WHO HAVE RESOURCES CAN ALREADY MAKE.

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WHY MUST IT BE WE WHO "SAVE" THESE FAMILIES BY DECIDING WHAT TYPE OF EDUCATION THE GOVERNMENT WILL PROVIDE THEM? WHAT CAN'T THEY BE EMPOWERED TO DECIDE? WHY CAN'T THAT IDEA AT LEAST BE TRIED? -- IN ONE TOWN? -- AS A PILOT PROJECT?

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT A VOUCHER PILOT WILL ACTUALLY HELP TO IMPROVE AND STRENGTHEN PUBLIC EDUCATION. COMPETITION BREEDS QUALITY. MONOPOLIES TEND TO PROMOTE MEDIOCRITY.

PERHAPS WE WILL EVEN REDEFINE WHAT IS MEANT BY "PUBLICLY FUNDED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS." I AGREE WITH THE OBSERVATION THAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS CAN IMPROVE ONLY IF GOVERNMENT DEREGULATES THOSE SCHOOLS AND GETS OFF THEIR BACKS. AT THE SAME TIME, PERHAPS NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS, WHICH ARE ALREADY GETTING PUBLIC FUNDS, SHOULD BE BROUGHT SOMEWHAT MORE UNDER CONTROL. MAYBE, UNDER THE CONCEPT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS, THE TRADITIONAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THESE TYPES OF SCHOOLS WILL BE MINIMIZED IF NOT DISSOLVED. MAYBE A "PUBLICLY-FUNDED EDUCATION" DOES NOT HAVE TO BE SYNONYMOUS WITH A "GOVERNMENT-RUN SCHOOL."

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HAS NOT YET DETERMINED WHAT DETAILS OF A VOUCHER PILOT IT MIGHT ADVOCATE OR SUPPORT. GOVERNOR WHITMAN HAS ASKED US TO TAKE MAYOR SCHUNDLER'S EVOLVING PLAN, TO TEST IT INTELLECTUALLY, TO

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CHALLENGE IT, TO DEVISE ALTERNATIVES, TO FLESH OUT THE DETAILS OF EACH OPTION, AND TO RECOMMEND THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF A PILOT PROJECT. SHE HAS ASKED THAT WE PRESENT THESE OPTIONS TO HER BY FALL, SO THAT ONE CAN TENTATIVELY BE CHOSEN, TRANSFORMED INTO LEGISLATION AND SUBJECTED TO FURTHER DEBATE AND DISCUSSION.

EITHER WE WILL DO A RESPONSIBLE, CREDIBLE JOB OF ADDRESSING ALL OF THE CONCERNS AND THE DECISION-MAKERS WILL BE PERSUADED. OR, WE WILL NOT, AND IN THAT EVENT THE PUBLIC WILL NOT ACCEPT OR ALLOW THE PILOT.

LIKE CONGRESSWOMAN ROUKEMA, I, TOO, HAVE A FEELING OF DEJA VU THAT I WANT TO DESCRIBE BECAUSE MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE ALTERNATE ROUTE HAS BEEN MENTIONED TWICE. TWELVE YEARS AGO THE MERE MENTION OF THAT BASIC CONCEPT PROPOSAL STIMULATED PREDICTIONS OF IMPENDING DISASTER SIMILAR TO THOSE I'M HEARING TODAY.

IT WAS SAID THAT NO ONE OF QUALITY OUTSIDE THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM WOULD WANT TO BE A TEACHER. IT WAS SAID THAT CHILDREN WOULD BE TREATED AS "GUINEA PIGS." IT WAS SAID THAT THE NEW TEACHERS WHO HAD NOT BEEN "TRAINED" THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM WOULD LEAVE THE CLASSROOM IN FRUSTRATION WITHIN THE FIRST MONTH. "THIS IS INSANITY," WAS THE CRY. "WE SHOULD IMPROVE THE 100 YEAR OLD TRADITIONAL SYSTEM, NOT CREATE ALTERNATIVES TO IT."

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IN SHORT, WE WERE TOLD -- I WAS TOLD -- THAT THE SKY WILL FALL. WELL, THE SKY DIDN'T FALL. WHEN THE DETAILS WERE PINNED DOWN, THE DEBATE SUBSIDED AND THERE WAS A RELUCTANT AGREEMENT TO GIVE THE PROGRAM A TRY. AND, WHEN THE PROGRAM WAS IMPLEMENTED, THE CONCERNS AND PREDICTIONS OF CRITICS WERE PROVEN WRONG -- NOT A LITTLE WRONG, BUT WRONG BY 180 DEGREES.

HIGH-QUALITY MEN AND WOMEN DID BECOME TEACHERS, AND CHILDREN WERE EDUCATED BY THESE TEACHERS. THE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN THE TEACHING FORCE INCREASED. TEACHER SHORTAGES DISAPPEARED AND TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS IMPROVED. THE TRADITIONAL ROUTE ALSO IMPROVED, IN NO SMALL MEASURE AS A RESULT OF THE EXISTENCE OF A COMPETING ALTERNATIVE ROUTE. NONE OF THAT WOULD EVER HAVE HAPPENED HAD WE HEEDED THE INITIAL OUTCRY AGAINST EVEN TRYING THE IDEA. AND, WE WOULD STILL NOT KNOW TODAY WHETHER OR NOT IMPROVEMENT WERE POSSIBLE.

THROUGH THESE EXPERIENCES I HAVE LEARNED TO RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS OF FEAR. I BELIEVE I RECOGNIZE THE LEGITIMATE FEAR THAT SOMETHING MAY FAIL AND HARM CHILDREN. IT IS THAT KIND OF FEAR THAT PRODUCES CONSTRUCTIVE IMPROVEMENTS IN NEW IDEAS. BUT, I THINK I HAVE ALSO COME TO RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS OF ANOTHER KIND OF FEAR -- THE SELF-INTERESTED FEAR THAT AN IDEA MIGHT ACTUALLY WORK AND SUCCEED. IT IS THAT KIND OF FEAR THAT GENERATES A

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CLOSED-MINDED RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND PREVENTS OUR EVER KNOWING WHETHER WE MIGHT HAVE SERVED CHILDREN MORE EFFECTIVELY.

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IS MOVING AGGRESSIVELY FORWARD TO PRODUCE A CREDIBLE PROPOSAL THAT CAN BE SUBJECTED TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY. WE WILL START WITH THE MAYOR'S PLAN AND WORK WITH HIM TO REFINE THAT PLAN AND GENERATE ALTERNATIVES.

THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION, RECOGNIZING THE POSSIBLE REALITY OF A VOUCHER PILOT, RECENTLY ADOPTED A REPORT ON STATE-OPERATED DISTRICTS. THE REPORT DOES NOT ENDORSE OR OPPOSE THE IDEA, BECAUSE IT HAS NOT YET BEEN DEFINED. RATHER, IT DIRECTS THE DEPARTMENT TO TAKE WHATEVER STEPS ARE NEEDED ASSURE THE EDUCATIONAL SOUNDNESS OF ANY PLAN THAT THE DEPARTMENT MIGHT DEVELOP.

IN ADDITION, I HAVE HIRED A PERSON TO WORK FULL TIME IN GUIDING THE DEPARTMENT'S PARTICIPATION. DR. FRANK ESPOSITO IS A PROFESSOR AT KEAN COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY, WHERE HE ALSO SERVED AS DEAN OF EDUCATION AND VICE PRESIDENT FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS. MANY OF YOU MAY REMEMBER THAT HE WORKED

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IN THE DEPARTMENT UNDER FORMER COMMISSIONER SAUL COOPERMAN AND HEADED UP THE STATE'S LARGEST SCHOOL CHOICE INITIATIVE TO DATE. PROFESSOR ESPOSITO IS ONE OF THE STATE'S FOREMOST EXPERTS ON THIS SUBJECT, AND I AM PLEASED TO INTRODUCE HIM TODAY.

IN CLOSING, I WOULD SAY THAT I SEE THIS DEBATE AS HEALTHY AND I URGE ITS CONTINUATION IN FUTURE MONTHS.

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