

Misplaced glee over choice loss

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After the House killed Gov. Mark Sanford's "Put Parents In Charge" initiative Wednesday, some members rushed out of the chamber, shouting in glee while exchanging high-fives with each other and education officials. But the children still trapped in failing public schools across our state had no reason to celebrate.

The House didn't merely refuse to give those students more educational choices. It refused to even consider the backers' major amendment on the House floor, with crucial procedural votes of 60- 53 and 60-55. In the hasty end, the proposal's entrenched opposition was consistent in its knee-jerk rejection of any legislative effort to give even the children in failing schools a private-school option. The predictable core of this opposition remains the state's education establishment, which has repeatedly dragged its feet on school choice.

That establishment helped derail the governor's "Put Parents in Charge" plan last year before condemning this year's version of the proposal to provide tax credits for private-school tuition as too costly. A major amendment by Reps. Shirley Hinson (R-Goose Creek), Jim Merrill (R-Daniel Island) and others wisely limited the scope of the plan -- and its cost -- by giving only students at failing public schools that private-school option. The amendment would have given tax credits to those with high enough incomes to use them and vouchers to those with lower incomes.

But in what Rep. Merrill accurately called "a bush-league move," the House didn't allow the amendment to even be considered Wednesday. Rep. Merrill told us Thursday that the refusal of so many colleagues -- including 18 Republicans -- to debate the amendment was "a shocking admission that they were putting politics above policy."

Still, "Put Parents In Charge" has gained ground. Last year, it didn't make it to the House floor. This year, it did.

And despite continuing resistance from the educational establishment across the nation, school choice -- including choosing private schools -- is a rising tide that can't forever be denied. Gov. Sanford, though disappointed by Wednesday's vote, issued a statement stressing his continuing commitment to the common-sense concept of encouraging parental involvement in education through increased alternatives. He pointed out:

"School choice has proven to work everywhere it's been implemented, providing opportunity for kids who take advantage of it and improving public school performance at the same time. I think it's important to note that despite a lot of accusations from folks who would rather things stay as they are, at no time during this discussion was anybody ever able to refute that. We're going to keep pushing to make the success of choices for parents elsewhere a success story for the thousands of kids who need it here in South Carolina."

The next time our legislators count the costs of expanding school choice, they should also count the costs of limiting it. At the least they should give any future "Put Parents In Charge" plan a fair, full debate.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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