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Could School Choice Erase the Income Gap?

By **Diana Furchtgott-Roth**

As the Democratic convention unfolds this week in Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the predictable themes is going to be inequality, the gap between the rich and the poor.

It's puzzling that one of the best remedies for economic inequality, allowing low-income parents to choose the elementary and secondary schools that their children attend, will likely be missing from the speeches in Charlotte. Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, announced his support for school choice in May.

The problem is two-fold. In many communities, children must attend their "neighborhood" public school, although this constraint has been modified in the last decade or so by new rules that let some children in some states qualify for out-of-boundary schools.

Second, the teachers' unions oppose monetary subsidies, usually called vouchers, that let students opt out of a local public school and attend another school, whether public or private, secular or parochial.

Unions oppose such choice because it threatens to reduce enrollment in the public schools, especially the worst ones, and shrink the number of employed teachers who pay dues to the union. In this, the unions put institutional self-interest ahead of wider educational choices for low-income children.

On Sunday, speaking in Boulder, Colorado, President Obama said "We believe in an America where no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, no matter who you love, you can pursue your own version of happiness, and you can make it here if you try."

As the Obamas must know, because they send their children to Sidwell Friends School, a highly-regarded private school in Washington, D.C. from which I graduated, "making it" in America is increasingly due to education. And with an average American high school graduation rate of 75 percent, and a scandalous 50 percent rate in some urban school districts, many children are behind by the time they leave high school without a diploma.

In America, public education is made available in ways importantly different from other types of benefits. It appears to be one of the few benefits where parents have no choice.

In contrast, consider the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps. Low-income individuals-47 million of them, at last count-are given government help in the form of debit cards to purchase food. They can use cards in grocery stores or supermarkets of their choice.

Imagine if they were told that they could take debit cards only to one store in their neighborhood. Naturally, there would be protests. People might say, "There isn't a good grocery store in my neighborhood." Or, "The grocery store in my neighborhood isn't safe." Perhaps, "The grocery store around the corner doesn't have fresh fruit and vegetables at good prices."

Groups representing low-income people would rightly complain that the government policy of forcing people to use food stamps only at neighborhood stores was leading to poor nutrition among lower-income Americans.

But when low-income children are forced to attend low-quality neighborhood schools,

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many of these same groups don't have anything to say.

It's not only food stamps where poor people have a choice. Take Medicaid, or the Children's Health Insurance Program, for youngsters from low-income families. No one says that people who qualify for Medicaid or CHIP must see only doctors in their neighborhoods. Sure, the choice of doctors is limited, but that is because of low reimbursement rates.

Or, take housing. After the failure of large public housing projects, Congress authorized housing vouchers, which low-income people can use anywhere the landlord agrees to participate in the program. And some localities require landlords to participate.

It's not difficult to envisage an educational system, like food stamps or housing vouchers, where dollars follow the child. They exist now for students in underperforming schools in states such as Louisiana and Florida, and could be extended to all students.

Ideally, if a state spends \$21,000 per child, as is the case in New York City, the parents could have a \$21,000 voucher, or a large portion of it, good at any certified school.

Data clearly show the success of private schools. In 2011, private schools had a 98 percent graduation rate, according to Education Department data. For Catholic schools, which take children from all walks of life, the graduation rate was 99 percent. Private schools are more free than public schools to expel trouble-makers, and the threat of expulsion helps improve discipline and raise graduation rates.

In contrast, the 2011 graduation rate for public school children who started high school in 2007 in New York City was 65 percent. Nationwide, it was 75 percent.

Private schools have a significantly higher percentage of graduates going on to college. According to 2011 Education Department data, 40 percent of public school students nationally went on to college, compared to 57 percent of students who attended private schools, 61 percent of students who went to "other religious" schools, and 85 percent of Catholic high school graduates.

Despite the evidence in favor of helping students opt out of public schools, school choice is curtailed or frustrated entirely due to vast sums contributed to the Democrats by unions, including teachers' unions.

The two big teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers spent at least \$127 million in 2011 on political activities and lobbying, and \$110 million on contributions, gifts, and grants to Democratic candidates, according to the unions' required Labor Department filings.

It's not as though teachers have much say in the matter. According to a new book by Mallory Factor, *Shadowbosses: Government Unions Control America and Rob Taxpayers Blind*, fewer than 10 percent of teachers have voted to join a union. (Mr. Factor is a professor of politics at The Citadel.) As with other industries, once teachers in a school district have voted to join a union-and many voted in the 1950s and 1960s-no recertification elections are required.

If Democrats truly want low-income Americans to "make it here if you try," in the words of Mr. Obama, there's no better way than removing opposition to school choice and allowing parents to choose children's schools.

*Diana Furchtgott-Roth is a contributing editor at RealClearMarkets, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and a columnist for the Examiner. She is the author of **Disaster: How Green Jobs Policies Are Damaging America's Economy** (Encounter Books, 2012).*

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