

Editorial Page – October 2, 2010

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School Reform Rainmakers

John Walton had the right idea for education donors.

It was a banner September for education philanthropy. Last week Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg appeared on Oprah Winfrey's TV show to announce his \$100 million donation to Newark, New Jersey, public schools. And this Wednesday the Charter School Growth Fund launched a new \$160 million fund that will finance the expansion of high-performing charter networks across the U.S.

Since 1970, average per-pupil expenditures after inflation have more than doubled, yet test scores have remained flat. Today the Newark public school system spends some \$22,000 per student, or more than twice the U.S. average, and the high school graduation rate is only 50%. Adding private money to this system would be a dreadful waste. So what excites us about these new donations is not the money per se but the reform agenda to which the dollars are tethered.

Mr. Zuckerberg is entrusting his donation to Newark Mayor Cory Booker, a strong advocate of vouchers and school choice, as is New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. The Newark teachers contract expired over the summer, and Mr. Booker has spoken favorably of the recently negotiated teacher contract in Washington, D.C., where schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee used private donations as leverage to enact reforms that tie teacher pay to student progress.

The new Charter School Growth initiative is supported by the Walton Family Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund and others. It will largely bypass the politicians and directly finance the growth of charter school networks, such as KIPP and the Harlem Success Academy, that have a record of accomplishment serving students that traditional public schools have consistently failed.

New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein recently wrote that "this year, at the Harlem Success Academy, a charter school in New York City, 88% of the students passed the state's reading test and 95% passed the math test, while comparable schools have pass rates of 35% in reading and 45% in math."

The late John Walton's reform strategy was to concentrate charters and vouchers in certain areas until an alternative school system is essentially in place. The goal is to create an educational market for the urban poor. Instead of neighborhood schools taking enrollment for granted, they should have to compete for students, with parents able to make choices based on what's best for their children.

More than 400,000 kids in the U.S. are on charter wait lists, and their parents will welcome this effort to replicate and expand the most successful charter school models. Like Walton and his fellow education philanthropists, they realize that it's not how much you spend but how you spend it.