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Can Race Be Removed from the Charter School Debate?

By Chris Braunlich

Which statement does not belong with the others?

- A. “One of the places where much of that innovation occurs is in our most effective charter schools.” – President Barack Obama
- B. “High-performing urban charter schools such as the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools are showing that minority students can close the achievement gap if given access to high-quality instruction.” – Rev. Al Sharpton
- C. “(Charters operate) six days a week. Tutoring services. Parents being called in on conferences on a regular basis. Each child furnished with a computer. Are there results shown? Yeah. And who's asking for it more than anyone else? African-Americans.” – Former Governor L. Douglas Wilder
- D. "Members expressed extreme concern and objection to the most radical change in public education since Massive Resistance....A lifetime of work to ensure equal access to education, democratic local control of our schools, and the opportunity for every child to succeed is under attack.” – Statement of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus opposing proposed charter school legislation.

Reading that, it would be easy to dismiss the Black Caucus as political cranks. But it would be wrong.

For starters, part of their response was strategic; an attempt to underscore budgetary concerns about proposed decreased state funding for education in low-income areas.

But part of it was also the result of what Dr. Morris Massey calls the *imprint period* of our lives – the time before ages eight or nine when we absorb everything around us; and the *modeling period* – the time before age 13 when we copy adults around us. Both are part of Massey’s view that “What we are is what we were when ...,” and that we develop our value systems through the prism of our early experiences.

Nine of the 12 Black Caucus members born and raised in Virginia came to age during that period of Massive Resistance to integration. Four of the other six members not born in Virginia grew up in similarly segregated schools. Virginia had “vouchers” back then: if you were white and your school came under a federal desegregation order, you received a state voucher to go to the all-white private school of your choice. Those schools were frequently called “charter schools.” Meanwhile, public schools were legally authorized to shut down, and black children had few options under a state law that claimed the “mixing of white and colored children constitutes a clear and present danger.”

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For that generation, the phrase “school choice” is defined by Massive Resistance. Is it any wonder why?

But holding to that view of the past has hurt the present, and endangers the future. The students who would most likely benefit from being given new options for their education are the ones most likely represented by caucus members. In the cities they represent - all of them in the mid-range of education spending - more than one out of four ninth graders fail to graduate on time. Nine of the 17 schools identified by the state as “persistently lowest-achieving schools” are in those same communities. The percentage of students in these schools unable to read or do math on grade level can run 30 or 40 percent and even higher at some grades.

If the views of current caucus members were formed by their experiences as children, what experiences are forming the views of these children today?

The generational divide among black voters is already evident. Polls consistently show younger African Americans supporting school choice by 20 points more than their elders. Those numbers are echoed in Virginia, where a November 2009 Braun Research poll showed support for charter schools at 68-19 among black voters under age 45, but support levels dropping to 49-40 among those over age 45. That trend will only accelerate as a younger generation replaces the older.

President Barack Obama long ago recognized these changes and advocated new directions in education reform – from supporting strong turn-around measures, to developing quality charter schools, to a “no excuses” philosophy when it comes to school failure. He’s responded to the need by taking charge of this new mindset and molding it with laser-like focus, and he’s been willing to take on a traditional ally – teachers’ unions – to do it.

Now that the General Assembly session is over, Virginia’s Black Caucus is in the same position. They have the opportunity to define and create innovative new directions for educationally at-risk children, and mold those options to ensure they address paramount equity issues. They might even find some untraditional allies in the process.

And taking control of those issues not only avoids the risk of political change as demographics transform, it helps ensure that the prism of experience for today’s children will be a better one than those of the past.

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