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Cuccinelli: For Reform, Stand With Parents

By Chris Braunlich

8/16/20113 – Read Republican Ken Cuccinelli and Democrat Terry McAuliffe’s plans for pre-K through 12 education, and you’ll find a lot in common: Both want a new emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) curricula, to reform the state Standards of Learning to incorporate more problem solving and critical thinking, and to give a boost to online education.

But there’s a critical difference underscoring the two plans. Search Cuccinelli’s six-page proposal and you’ll find the word “parent” mentioned 16 times. McAuliffe? “Parent” is mentioned only once in his two page plan.

If language really does have meaning, their respective use of it demonstrates a primary difference between the two candidates that goes beyond the desire of each to educate students. It speaks to where they place their trust.

Professional educators frequently speak of parents as a child’s “first teacher.” School boards and school superintendents refer to parents and schools as “partners” in a child’s education. And they mean it each time they say it.

But a genuine partnership only comes if the “first teachers” (parents) have skin in the public policy game that sets the stage for how education is provided, who influences its administration, and what should be done when a child isn’t learning. On that measure, Cuccinelli is standing with parents.

More importantly, by providing parents a more robust set of options to act in the best interests of their child, Cuccinelli is also standing for a profound reform that could force systemic changes – particularly in areas where poor and minority students have been underserved and failed by a rigid educational system unable (or unwilling) to respond to the needs of those students.

For example, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) is considered the “gold standard” against which states measure their own exams and student achievement. In Virginia, 83 percent of low-income 4th graders and 85 percent of low-income 8th graders are not reading at a proficient level. In Math, 76 percent of low-income 4th graders and 82 percent of low-income 8th graders are not proficient. Without a change, numbers like that mean an entire segment of our society is destined to be less than successful in both college and career.

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Schools and school systems dominated by students with those demographics have too often proven unable to meet the needs of such students. Nor is money alone the answer: Alexandria's Jefferson-Houston Elementary has failed to meet full state accreditation for nine of the last ten years, despite being in a system spending more than \$17,000 per student.

Yet, one of the frustrations for Virginia policy-makers is that there is no continuum of rewards for schools that improve (although Cuccinelli proposes doing that) and consequences for schools that repeatedly fail the children they are supposed to educate. Hobbled by language in the Virginia Constitution putting near-absolute control of even consistently failing schools in the hands of the local jurisdictions that let them get that way, the state Department of Education isn't empowered to force significant change.

Former State Education Superintendent Bill Boshier, now executive director of VCU's Education Policy Program, hit the nail on the head: "If you are in a school that's failing to provide academic programs for young people, then you need to have the opportunity to move, and you need to have the opportunity to bring pressure to the local school board to do something different."

So Cuccinelli's plan empowers a force that's rarely been empowered: The parents who send their children to those schools. He proposes arming parents with both private and public scholarships, the ability to force public school reform, and new pathways to developing quality charter schools (as well as offering traditional public schools more charter-like flexibility to meet their goals).

Not only would this provide a new set of opportunities for children whose school is currently determined by the zip code in which they live, it would likely drive improvements in the traditional local public school system for those who choose to remain. Study after study in Ohio, Florida and Wisconsin have demonstrated that, faced with the possibility of students actually *leaving* the traditional public school, local systems have refocused their energies on rebuilding their school culture and increasing proficiency rates for educationally at-risk children.

In the end, the issue of education is about whether or not the next generation will be prepared to take their place in society. Succeeding in doing that requires a lot of tools in the toolbelt and, by choosing to stand with parents, Ken Cuccinelli proposes to add more tools to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

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