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An Interview with The Civic Caucus

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Parental choice, student performance outweigh re-segregation concerns in assessing public chartered schools

Notes of the Discussion

Present : Dave Broden, Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Rick Dornfeld, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Joe Nathan, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder, Bill Wilson.

Bill Wilson is the executive director and founder of Higher Ground Academy, a charter school in St. Paul. Higher Ground is a multicultural K-12 school of choice that opened in 1999 to students in kindergarten through ninth grade. An additional grade level was added each successive year until the 12th grade was added in the fall of 2002. The school currently has an enrollment of 745 students.

US News and World Report has twice recognized Higher Ground as one of Minnesota's and the nation's leading high schools. The *StarTribune* has recognized the school several times as a "Beating the Odds" school.

Wilson became the first African-American elected to the St. Paul City Council in 1980 by winning a citywide election. He also served as Commissioner of Human Rights under Governors Wendell Anderson and Rudy Perpich. Throughout his career, Wilson has been the recipient of many awards for his service to the community. He served as the chairman of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Commission for Minnesota from 1985 to 1993.

He was awarded BS and MS-Education degrees from the University of Massachusetts.

Joe Nathan is the director of the Center for School Change in St. Paul. The Center works with educators, parents, business people, students, policymakers and others to increase student achievement, raise high school and postsecondary graduation rates, improve student motivation and outlook, and build stronger community relationships.

A noted education policy researcher, Nathan has been an inner-city public school aide, teacher and administrator. He helped write several education laws, including Post-Secondary Education Options (PSEO) and the nation's first charter public school law. The author of three books and a frequent guest on television and radio programs, Nathan is also a widely published newspaper and Internet columnist.

Nathan earned a BA degree from Carleton College and an MA and PhD from the University of Minnesota.

Summary

Giving families an array of strong educational choices and providing high-performing public school options are among the most important strategies to improve education today, according to Bill Wilson and Joe Nathan. Raising the issue of chartered public schools serving predominantly students of color overlooks the fact that there is a huge difference between offering families of color high-quality options and telling them they have no choice, but must attend one clearly inferior school because of their race. K-12 education should learn a lesson from higher education, where many African-American leaders in their fields have attended historically black colleges and universities.

The chartered public school movement - along with some districts and the expansion of Dual High School/College Credit - provide a growing number of educational choices both for academically proficient students and for those not doing well in traditional district public schools. Many of the public schools that are performing well, especially with low-income students, are charter schools. Educators should stop asking whether district or charter schools are better and start working together to learn from the best-performing schools, whether those are district or charter schools. There also should be more opportunities, both within districts and the charter sector, to create new options based on emerging research and technology. Finally, Minnesota public schools - both district and charters - should be able to employ people they think will help students.

Discussion

Many leaders in the African-American community have attended historically black colleges.

There is an important historical background to the issues of race, educational results and chartering, according to Bill Wilson and Joe Nathan. They pointed out that there is a long-standing tradition of leaders in the African-American community coming from historically black colleges or universities, such as Morehouse, Spelman, Howard and Meharry. Well-known graduates of historically black colleges include Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, Douglas Wilder, Thurgood Marshall, Toni

Morrison, Vernon Jordan, Phylicia Rashad, Ossie Davis, Spike Lee, Marian Wright Edelman, Alice Walker and a host of other African-American leaders in their fields. Nathan noted that Meharry University in Nashville is the single largest producer of African-American primary-care doctors.

Bill Wilson, himself a former student at a historically black college, agreed that many black people wanting to further their education went to predominantly black colleges. "These schools grew out of a segregated society," he said. "There was no other opportunity for black students to get an education." He said a large number of people will continue to go to black colleges for a variety of reasons, including accessibility. "Often times children leave there with a better understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. These institutions are part of our reality."

Wilson grew up attending segregated schools, in a community, like many others, that gave no choice for black families. Wilson grew up in southern Indiana, which was segregated, and went to segregated schools. "There was no choice at all," he said. "There were about three designated schools set aside for black children. All the other schools were set aside for everybody else. I remember riding the school bus past many, many schools, some of which I could almost see from where I lived, to get to the school that was designated for black children." He said there was a pipeline from one segregated school to another: elementary, middle and high school.

Wilson and Nathan asked the group (and, by extension, other Minnesotans): Do you see the difference between people of color and low-income people having a choice among various schools and being required to attend a clearly inferior school because of their race?

The issue of race draws people into conflict, but doesn't address the real problem. Wilson said he is troubled by the continuing discussion about the whole issue of race. "Race is a social construction, not science. There's no scientific basis for race as it is being used. There is one race: the human race. The roots of race in America go back to slavery. Racial designation was used as a way to enslave a whole group of people easily distinguished by the color of their skin."

Wilson said race and color became synonymous. Although the old theories on differences by race have been debunked, intellectuals continue to evoke race as though it were science. "For the myth of 'race' to continue to be used to decide life chances of people is shameful," he said. "It runs counter to everything we know about human potentialities. The color of the skin has nothing to do with a person's character or intellect. When I hear discussions of race in education, I immediately become very, very keen to see what is the underlying agenda."

"Race" often is used to engage and draw people into a conflict or discussion at the expense of addressing the real problem, Wilson continued. "It's an easy way out and an easy way to use people as scapegoats.

The charter school movement gives people a chance to exercise choice. "The charter school movement is a restart of the need for people to be able to make a way for children to learn," Wilson explained. "In traditional public schools, there are many children who don't succeed for whatever reason. One size doesn't fit all. There will continue to be a need for some form of alternative. The charter school has literally captured the alternative movement. The charter school gives people a chance to exercise choice, what works best for them. It recognizes the individuality, the differences in human beings, the different ways we learn, the way we excel."

Nathan asked, "Isn't there a dramatic difference between telling people, 'You have no options; because of the color of your skin you must go to that school,' and telling them 'You have a wide range of options'?" He said the discussion of schools serving predominantly students of color in Minnesota garners a lot of foundation funds and media access. "But the difference between no choice, that is, being assigned to an inferior school, and having a wide range of options is not something that's widely discussed."

Nathan continued. "Some critics make no distinction. Why is it acceptable for some (white) Minnesotans to be allowed to choose a school predominantly white, but apparently not acceptable for families of color to have a variety of choices, some of which are predominantly one race? Shouldn't we pay attention to the fact that the majority of schools identified by the *Star Tribune* as 'Beating the Odds' in reading and math are chartered schools serving predominantly students from one racial group?"

Education is not only about test scores; over sixty percent of what people need to be successful in the world has little to do with their academic training, Wilson stated. "It's all about relationships, being able to work in teams, add value and produce. Charter schools provide some of those opportunities."

Nearly all the students at Higher Ground Academy, a charter school in St. Paul, are east African, but it is diverse in ethnicities. In 1997, Wilson and some colleagues organized Higher Ground Academy, a charter school in St. Paul. "We said if children continue to suffer from lack of education, then maybe we can do better," Wilson said. The school, which opened in September 1999, "is a high-performing charter school, because we believe all children can learn and great teachers make a difference."

Higher Ground's K-12 enrollment is 745, equally male and female. Nearly all the students (98 percent) are East African - children of new immigrants or new immigrants themselves - and nearly all (again, 98 percent) are from low-income families. Seventy percent of the students are from St. Paul and its suburbs and 30 percent are from Minneapolis and its suburbs.

In response to a question about changing demographics in Minnesota, Wilson said, "When we look at the differences, we're really dealing with ethnic groups, not racial groups. Ethnic groups tend to orient toward their ethnicity. Ethnicity has a lot to do with choice. As time goes on, we will have multiple ethnicities within charter schools. It's a process; it will happen naturally."

Nathan commented, "Somalia and Ethiopia and Kenya, which were the homes of many students at Higher Ground, are not all the same. Some people look at a school like Higher Ground and see no diversity. Those who know East Africa well know there are many differences among, for example, these three countries."

Higher Ground and some other charter schools are beating the odds. Nathan pointed out that Higher Ground Academy - along with other charter schools like Global Academy, Harvest Prep/Seed Academy and Best Academy - have been listed among the top 10 *Star Tribune* "Beating the Odds" schools. Schools on the list have a high percentage of low-income students, but still demonstrate high-proficiency learning results in math and reading.

All 10 of the top schools on the 2012 *StarTribune* "Beating the Odds" list for math are charter schools and for reading, nine of the top 10 are charter schools. Higher Ground ranks eighth on the 2012 list in proficiency in reading and fifth on proficiency in math, despite having the second-highest rate of poverty of the 10 schools on the two lists.

Charter school enrollment is growing in Minnesota, particularly in Minneapolis and St. Paul, so that 25 percent of public school students in Minneapolis and 20 percent in St. Paul attend charter schools. In response to a question, Nathan outlined the impact of the chartering movement in Minnesota:

- Over the last decade the number of K-12 kids in chartered public schools in Minnesota has increased almost fourfold - from 10,162 in 2001-2002 to 39,129 in 2011-2012. The number of students attending district public schools has declined by 45,820 (or 5.5 percent) - from 831,535 to 785,715. The figures show, though, that the vast majority of kids in the state attend district public schools.
- Over the same time frame, K-12 chartered public school enrollment in Minneapolis has grown by almost six times - from 1,921 to 11,125. K-12 enrollment in district public schools has declined by 30 percent - from 47,658 to 33,503. As of the 2011-12 school year, 25 percent of enrollment in Minneapolis public schools is in chartered public schools.
- Over the last decade, chartered K-12 public school enrollment in St. Paul has grown from 3,598 to 9,014 - an increase of 2-1/2 times. Enrollment in district public schools has declined from 43,714 to 37,063 - a decline of

15 percent. Now 20 percent of K-12 public school students in St. Paul are enrolled in chartered schools.

Nathan commented, "Some would say, 'It's terrible that kids are going to Harvest Prep, Best Academy, Friendship Academy, Global Academy, Higher Ground. We should shut 'em down or force 'em to change.' But maybe we should listen to the families."

- School district officials in both Minneapolis and St. Paul have said they are trying to learn from chartered schools. In a Nov. 15, 2012, Minnesota Public Radio story, Sara Paul, director of the Office of New Schools in the Minneapolis district, said there is value in working with charters and that the growth in charter enrollment has forced traditional school districts to rethink their "us vs. them" attitude. If the district schools use charters as a vehicle for R & D, she said, and "we take those best practices and replicate them, there's tremendous value back to the system."

St. Paul school superintendent Valeria Silva has asked Eric Mahmoud, founder and director of Harvest Prep/Seed Academy, to work with St. Paul schools to help them adapt and adopt some of the Harvest Prep ideas. "While some might say it's terrible to have a school like Harvest Prep," Nathan said, "districts responsible for improving the achievement gap are saying, 'We have things to learn from you.'" Give these district leaders credit for their openness, he suggested.

For the last five years, Nathan's Center for School Change has run a joint leadership academy for district and charter schools. "We believe there are a lot of lessons to learn back and forth. All the wisdom is not one place or another."

· Charters are broadening the definition of success. They're pioneering the idea that it's not enough to just have strong academics; students also must have soft skills, like persistence and goal setting. Nathan praised Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, which has developed the "Hope Survey" to measure whether students are learning persistence, goal setting and other vital life skills. New Country is working with more than 30 other schools around the country to help them assess not only academic, but also applied skills. One of those schools is the High School for Recording Arts, a charter school in St. Paul, which is so successful that it won an award from Junior Achievement for having the best business run by high school students in the country.

High School for Recording Arts students create videos on YouTube and produce them under contract for companies and organizations like Verizon, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education and State Farm Insurance. "Kids have come in off the street, some with criminal records, and they're turning their lives around," he said. "They learn to use their anger and their rage and their frustration and their creativity to create things that are useful to others." In order to graduate from the school, students must be admitted to some form of higher education.

Noting that the High School for Recording Arts is predominantly African-American, Nathan commented, "People can make a lot of assertions about what happens in schools that are predominantly this race or that race, but I think it's important to really take a look at these schools. It's important to look at what other people, like *US News and World Report* and the *StarTribune*, say about schools that to some people's eyes look like all the kids are the same."

Higher Ground Academy is doing better than traditional public schools at closing the achievement gap. An interviewer asked how single-race charter schools are doing compared with district schools that are more integrated. Wilson responded that a study found that his school, Higher Ground Academy, is leading district schools in eliminating the achievement gap between black and white children.

Wilson explained, "Many parents transfer their children to our charter school with the hope of getting a better education for their children. Our experience is that many of the children are performing below grade level if they transfer in by as late as the eighth grade. Then the student tends to be, on average, four grade levels behind."

Nathan asked, "What is the typical charter? To say there's a typical charter or a typical district school makes no sense. We must go beyond the old ways of thinking about race and about district public schools and charter schools. What I think we need to be asking is, 'What can we learn from the most effective schools - district or charter?'"

The education community should end the debate about whether district schools or charter schools are better. In response to a question, Nathan outlined six things the education community should do, given that Minnesota has one of the nation's largest achievement gaps.

1. We need a broader discussion about what it means to be a successful school. "We have a mania about standardized tests," he said. "It's way past time to have a broader conversation and a broader implementation about what virtually everybody who looks at schools and learning knows, which is it's not just about standardized tests. We ought to be measuring persistence and goal-setting skills. We need to have a broader, clearer way of describing what's happening in schools. The Hope Survey is a great example. We should use that and other measures of applied skills and knowledge"

2. We ought to end the debate about which is better: chartered or district schools. "We should ask what we can learn from Higher Ground (chartered school) *and* from Barton Elementary (district school) in Minneapolis *and* from Dayton's Bluff (a district school in St. Paul that regularly appears on the 'Beating the Odds' list.)"

3. We need to train a new generation of teachers and principals. District and chartered schools should have more flexibility in who they can hire. Minnesota public schools should be able to hire people who have been certified through either traditional or alternative routes in other states. Right now, teachers coming from other states, even if they are award-winning and highly successful, must spend thousands of dollars to take additional courses at Minnesota colleges and universities. Is this in the best interests of our students? It does not appear so.

We also should recognize that many of the most effective chartered public schools in this and other states are run by people who are not certified principals. Yet there is continuing pressure to force charters to employ directors who are certified. Again, given the success of people like Eric Mahmoud and Bill Wilson, would such a regulation be in the best interest of students?

4. We must give more visibility to people who are successful.

5. Minnesota should be ensuring that startup funds are available for new public schools, both district and chartered. Right now, there are funds to help start charters. But there are no such dollars to help create site-governed schools within districts. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers wisely urged more options within the district, similar to the Boston Pilot Schools, which are part of the district. We should help district educators create new, research-based options.

We shouldn't just be replicating currently successful schools. Where would General Mills be if they just tried to improve Wheaties? Where would 3M be if they just tried to improve and expand sales of current products? What would have happened at Apple if they had just focused on improving desktop computers? Innovation has been central to American progress. We need more of it in public education.

6. Businesses and foundations seeking to help close achievement gaps should be working closely with highly effective schools, whether district or chartered.

Responding to a question about chartering in the metro area vs. Greater Minnesota, Nathan said there are more kids attending suburban and exurban charters than there are kids attending charters in the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. There are charters all over Minnesota, he said, from Duluth to White Earth to the far southwest and the far southeast.

An interviewer commented, "I grew up in the South when separate-but-equal was a nefarious methodology. I view with alarm a process that has similar results in many ways. One concern is that the increase of charter schools in the suburbs may be a result of a new white flight. What worries me is that the result of this re-segregation may be counter-productive to what we're hoping for these kids, which is to be successful in the work world. If we divide by ethnicity in K-12, what does that mean for teamwork, for collaboration, for sensitivity to cultural differences that we need to have these kids prepared for in the work world?"

Nathan pointed out that some suburbs have attracted a variety of families and some suburban charters are racially diverse. "They're not the nearly all-white academies, which is what a number of the district schools are in the suburbs." Nathan cited charters in Brooklyn Center, Forest Lake and Blaine as examples of schools serving a variety of students. He also pointed to graduates of historically black colleges and universities, cited earlier, as people who have succeeded in the world.

Wilson responded that the parents who come to Higher Ground Academy ask for the best education possible for their kids. "We're recognized as one of the top high schools in the nation, because we do more for students and have included having higher expectations for students. For example, students must get a letter of acceptance to college before they can graduate. We participate in programs such as Genesis Works, through which the students do internships in workplaces. As a charter school we know what children need in terms of formal education and we're providing that for them."

"We promote Post-Secondary Education Options (PSEO)," Wilson continued. "Juniors and seniors must participate in PSEO and advanced placement courses to demonstrate they're college-ready. These learning options also reduce the cost of higher education for families. Bottom line, we're doing the things that work best for the children we're serving."

Conclusion

Wilson concluded by saying, "I think in time, this whole issue of re-segregation with respect to charter schools will not even be a discussion. People are really going to turn their attention to the quality of education. Let's avoid this whole dilemma of race. It's really about ethnicity, at best. Let's not get trapped into the race question at the expense of respecting a person's humanity."

Nathan concluded, "Chartering sometimes succeeds, sometimes fails, just like democracy or the free press. But aren't we better off with a free press? Aren't we better off giving people a chance to develop new products or services - whether it's an i-Phone or a heart pacemaker or a Higher Ground Academy? Aren't we better off empowering teachers and parents to create new kinds of schools - either within the district or outside the district - that are accountable for results? It doesn't mean it always works well. It doesn't mean it's the only strategy to improve. It isn't. The central question for me is, isn't this part of the strategy of moving forward? I think the answer, after being a parent of three children, all of whom attended and graduated from the St. Paul Public Schools, and being an educator for 42 years, is yes."