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# School Choice for J. B., but Not for Thee

Flush with his billions, J. B. Pritzker has plenty of really nice options in life. For one, he has the choice of where to send his children to school without worrying about the expense.

His children attended two of the most prestigious, expensive, and—one hopes for the money it costs—best private schools in Chicago: Francis W. Parker School (\$36,480–\$42,300/year) and the Latin School of Chicago (\$36,670–\$40,970/year).

Well, Pritzker once explained, the two schools were in effect his “neighborhood schools.” He stated: “Both of my kids go to private school near our home, and that actually was the major reason that we made that decision was that the schools were very close to where we live.”

Aside from the all-important question of his home location, Pritzker himself knows the value of a private school education, having attended the highly selective Milton Academy, a private boarding school in Milton, Massachusetts.

But don't get him wrong. He wants your children to have good schools too, provided you have no say in which one they attend. In other words, schools run by the government in *your* neighborhood—public schools, where you have little or no say about what is being taught or what the results are for your child.

Big public-school districts, like Chicago's, are run by a bloated, expensive, political bureaucracy, which, of course, claims to know better than you about how to educate your children. But the record of success in Chicago schools is so dismal that parents have a right to worry that attending them is actually really bad for their kids.

Pritzker is so attached to the idea that public schools are everywhere and always the best choice for your kids (but not his) that he fiercely opposes giving parents the option, and the financial means, to send their children to better private or religious or business-operated schools—schools of *their* choice.

In this he also fights the popular charter school and school voucher movements with every ounce of his being, despite the popularity of school choice and despite the evidence that some children might be better off in schools of their parents' choice.

Never mind the fact that the principal beneficiaries of school choice are minorities and lower-income families who can't otherwise afford a private or parochial

school education. This is a major betrayal of what has been one of the most loyal Democratic constituencies.

Virtually at every opportunity Pritzker has made his opposition clear. He supports a state law that limits the number of charter schools that are allowed. He opposes a successful and innovative state scholarship program that incentivizes private contributions to make school choice possible. As for direct aid through vouchers? Forget it.

Why would Pritzker oppose such a popular, creative, and successful effort to better educate children and meet their unique needs?

Because the education unions and other government employee unions direct him to fight like hell to oppose choice.

Education unions see choice as a threat to their power to wring high pay and benefits from taxpayers, to control the length of the school day and year, to enrich pensions that have almost bankrupted the state, to maintain absolute control over curriculum, and more.

But why should Pritzker cave in to the unions when he doesn't appear to depend on their sizeable—I should say gargantuan—campaign donations? Aren't his supporters right when they say he's so rich that he doesn't have to suck up to any special interest to finance his own campaign?

You would think so, but it takes more than campaign cash to pay for those endless, boneheaded

television commercials. You need people, their energy, their organization skills, their determination to knock on doors, rally the troops, and make sure you not only turn out to vote but vote “right.” Besides, Pritzker can’t risk the substantial amounts that the unions give to other Democratic candidates in Illinois by antagonizing the government worker unions.

These special interests all launch the standard, tiresome arguments to “prove” that allowing students and their parents to choose their school should be forbidden. Something about how it’ll rob the “real” public schools of money, which is not true. And . . . well, there’s really nothing else that persuasive or true.

The evidence is all in that parents, especially lower-income parents who are struggling to make ends meet, love being able to take their children’s education tax dollars and spend them at the school they want their children to attend.

Recently, school choice legislation has been passed in Arizona and West Virginia. In Florida, black pro-school-choice mothers approving of Governor Ron DeSantis’s school choice stance gave him the extra 100,000 votes he needed to be elected governor.

Here’s a thought experiment that explains how vouchers work: take a look at Chicago’s failed public schools and the taxes that support them.

The cost to “educate” an elementary school student is more than \$20,000 a year. What parent would

not take a voucher worth about \$8,000 of that amount for each child and pay it to a Chicago private, trade, business-operated or parochial school of his or her choice? That is about the cost of a Catholic school education in Chicago.

Since the Chicago Public School System gets \$7.8 billion a year from its close-to-top-in-America high property taxes — about half of the city’s total budget of \$16.7 billion — this means that spending \$8,000 a student could mean cutting Chicago taxes by about 25 percent if Chicago’s system went all voucher.

What’s not to like about cutting your house’s tax bill from \$4,000 down to \$3,000? The education unions and the politicians they donate to (to the tune of \$20 million+ a year) in Illinois would, of course, not like it at all.

As I said, just a “thought experiment,” but it’s something the Pritzker Democrats, who rely on money and political activism from government worker unions, are never going to give you. Other states are doing this, but not Illinois, a state which “is not broken, it is fixed” as one political commentator once ruefully joked.

As if to emphasize the point that they are in charge, the Chicago Teachers Union has gone on strike, again and again, to demand the likes of a 15 percent pay raise over three years and other benefits most of us can only imagine. Pritzker has failed to use his “bully pulpit” to speak on behalf of the abandoned children.

But he has spoken out forcefully against the Illinois Opportunity Scholarship Program, a successful and popular organized volunteer effort that gives low-income and middle-class students, and their parents, choice.

In 2021, some 6,197 scholarships, averaging \$6,600 each were awarded to those students who are thirsty for a better education of their choosing. Empower Illinois, a not-for-profit organization, raised more than \$48 million from donors to allow the kids to attend 430 schools. But Pritzker has been trying to kill the program on behalf of the teachers' unions, and the program was saved only because a bi-partisan group of lawmakers saw too much value in the program to let it die. But because of the opposition and a cap it imposed, only 21 percent of the more than 29,000 applicants for the aid received it. If re-elected, Pritzker will unconscionably target the program again.

Here is yet another example, the latest, of the unions' ripping off Illinois taxpayers: the proposed Amendment 1 to the Illinois Constitution. If you think that unions should only be able to negotiate wages, hours, vacations, and such, you'll be surprised to know that Amendment 1 will expand what can be negotiated far beyond the typical or historic.

If approved in a referendum, the amendment would give unions – public and private – the right to negotiate almost anything that falls under the vague

titles of “safety at work” and “economic welfare.” In other words, virtually anything. The Illinois Policy Institute warns that even existing laws could be overturned in collective bargaining. This sounds to me like an attack on democracy.

No, I’m not opposed to collective bargaining and the right of employees to form unions. I once was an officer and picket committee chairman of the Chicago Newspaper Guild. I know firsthand that negotiations can be tough or sometimes even fruitless, but workers in business have this right.

Government worker unions are different. They all sit on *both sides* of the negotiating table because they donate tens of millions of dollars to the politicians on the *other* side of the negotiating table.

That is why – until government unions in state governments became rich and powerful campaign contributors and political activists – my hero Democrat presidents from Roosevelt and Truman to Kennedy opposed letting government workers unionize. JFK later changed his mind, much to my disappointment.

The union-control-of-public-education problem became even worse after candidate Jimmy Carter, seeking the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1976, made a deal with the education unions: “You nominate me as your candidate and I will create a new cabinet-level national Department of Education.”

The deal was struck. Education union members

and their relatives were about 40 percent of all delegates to the Democratic national convention in 1976.

Adding in the Southern states where he was popular gave Carter his victory.

Today the Department of Education (DOE) in Washington mandates everything from work rules to textbook choices, in return for giving your tax dollars to school districts who obey its directives . . . most recently, from the Biden administration, now an increasing flow of peculiar and unpopular “gender directives” for textbooks and school bathrooms and locker rooms, directives few voters would approve of for their own schools.

A few years ago, every single Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives voted to mandate that all public schools in America be forced to allow boys who “identify” as girls into every school’s female bathrooms and locker rooms. It passed the House, but the saner U.S. Senate did not allow this legislation to come to a vote. As I have said here before, this is no longer the same Democratic Party I was once a loyal member of.

The Illinois Constitution already contains the lopsided provision that public employee benefits can never be diminished. The tragic result is that the overly generous pension benefits must remain in place even if the costs are bludgeoning the state.

To wit: the five public sector pension funds managed by the state are short *\$140 billion* to roughly *\$300*

*billion* or somewhere in the stratosphere, depending on the method of accounting. In the worst-case equivalent, that would mean that every penny of Illinois's operating budget for some seven years would go into pensions. Nothing left for schools, highways, social services, or anything else.

Giving any special interest group veto power over laws enacted by representatives of the people is one more betrayal of the principles that I used to consider near and dear to the hearts of Democrats. Now Illinois Democrats, including Pritzker, act as if their lives depend on squelching school choice, much to the harm of the very people they represent.