

Views:

School Choice for Marginalized Students

On October 17, the Vermont Anti-Racism Action Team (VARAT) held a press conference to announce its decision to demand legislation that would afford school choice vouchers to students of color. Since that time the organization has met in coalition with organizers from other marginalized groups (lgbtqia, disabilities, low income) to broaden the legislation to include *all* marginalized students.

VARAT agrees with the Vermont Supreme Court's assertion in *Brigham* (1997) that "education is a fundamental obligation of the State." VARAT further agrees with the Vermont

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such a system."

Since our press conference, we have received both positive responses and reactions against the voucher system. VARAT hopes to hear from many more Vermont residents on this issue.

Many called in or

Why should the least advantaged, the poorest, and the most disenfranchised members of our society be shackled to one school?

Supreme Court that "the distribution of a resource as precious as educational opportunity may not have as its determining force the mere fortuity of a child's residence. It requires no particular constitutional expertise to recognize the capriciousness of

emailed in about several points.

We do have school choice in the United States. We have school choice for the Rockefellers and the DuPonts. We have school choice for anyone with pockets deep enough to

afford it. We have school choice for families who can afford to pick up and move to the neighborhood of their choice. The people who don't have school choice are the ones who need it most – the least advantaged, the poorest, and the most disenfranchised members of our society. Why should they be shackled to one school? Why shouldn't they be able to choose the school that best suits their needs?

There is something very paternalistic about a society that says, "We will let the rich, the wealthy and the powerful have choices, but the weak and the poor cannot be trusted with choice; we will have to decide what is best for them, we can't trust them to choose for themselves; they will all go to the schools we design for them and the schools we tell them to go to." But if your family has money then you can decide what education is best for yourselves.

If we are going to break the cycle of racism, homophobia, ableism, and poverty in these United States, we have to empower people. We have to empower victims of racism, homophobia, ableism, and poverty with the tools to break that cycle. Money is power. Choice is power. Education is the most powerful tool of all. We want what is best for our children – not what some group of bureaucrats tells us is best for our children. We want the power to shape our own lives and our own future.

Don't be afraid to talk about Celeste Washington's case. Why should a young African-American / Irish-American girl have to go to a school where she has to listen to name-calling and

racial slurs like "oreo," "zebra," "faggot," "kyke," "spic" every day? Why should her parents have to pay out of their own pocket to find her a healthier, better education, when they are already paying taxes for her education? Why is it that we have laws on our books to stop that behavior but it takes four years to go through the court system – and even then – even when a judge like the one in Celeste's case says, "The behaviors in the school were offensive enough to deprive a student of color of a decent education" – why is it our courts won't do anything until we "prove the school administration is deliberately indifferent to that behavior"? We have to prove "deliberate indifference"? That is outrageous!

Transportation-is-a-problem argument. It was a problem for Celeste's parents. But it was better for them than leaving her in that hostile environment. Are they better off with a choice or with no choice? Transportation is always a problem for the poorest and weakest in our society. Should we say to a single parent "your children can't have healthcare because transportation is a problem"?

Choice will take the best students out of the worst schools and make them that much worse. First, that is not what has happened in Milwaukee and Cleveland and other places that have given choices to students. Just the opposite has happened. The worst schools have begun to *clean up their act* so they can hold onto their students and keep their jobs. But today there is no incentive for the worst

schools to do anything. Those schools are monopolies. Their students are chained to the school and the school gets paid even when they are not doing a good job.

The poorest and worst schools and the smallest schools won't have enough money to survive – they'll lose students and have to close. If the schools are so unsafe that enough students want to leave so that they won't be able to stay open – and if those schools refuse to shape up because of school choice – then I wonder if they should remain open.

I have devoted the last 30 years of my life uprooting racism at every front. Nowhere is the struggle more tragic or strewn with casualties than in our public schools. For the young Latino/a, Asian, Native American, African-American, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning students and their allies, and students with disabilities – students who are "different" – the scars of racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia that are inflicted on them as children or teenagers are scars that not only rob them of the full joys of youth, but they are scars that, in many cases, might deform their lives. Racism, homophobia, classism, and ableism in schools deprives our children of the full benefit of the education they need, deserve and have every right to demand. ▼

Paij Wadley-Bailey is an African-American lesbian and the volunteer Director of the Vermont Anti-Racism Action Team. She lives in Montpelier.

One-Street

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Trevorton, and central Pennsylvania, and Hinesburg,

and Vermont.

As 2003 came to a close, I was sending off contributions to Outright Vermont, to help care for the well-being of queer youth in Vermont, and to

Common Roads, caring for the queer youth of Central Pennsylvania. Oh how I wish someone had been there in the 1950s and 60s – in Pennsylvania, in Port Trevorton,

everywhere.

Sometime I will try again to be in touch with Joey. If he is gay, I hope he too has found a way to come out, to live a good life. And I do still want

to know if my childhood gaydar was working all those many years ago. ▼

Bill Lippert lives with his partner Enrique in Hinesburg.