

Choice as a Way Out of Failing Schools

7/3/06

I was excited to read Kahlenberg's commentary containing ideas for changing NCLB choice programs. His focus on disincentives in the present system was right on the money.

Whether it's because they worry about test scores dropping, or just don't see what's in it for them to do otherwise, high performing schools certainly haven't embraced the opportunity to prove their effectiveness by inviting in large numbers of kids transferring from low performing schools.

I read recently about a North Carolina superintendent from a predominantly white, middle-class school district who hired private investigators to ensure that poor, lower-performing students didn't "sneak into his schools". It would have created an "administrative nightmare," he said.

Mr. Kahlenberg's specific suggestions to a) provide a grace period before calculating transfer students' test scores and b) offer financial incentives to schools for actually reaching out to struggling students caught in poorly performing schools are outstanding ideas that, it seems to me, could easily be implemented.

Parents around the country are desperately seeking real options for their children stuck in persistently failing schools. With less than one percent of eligible parents nationwide taking advantage of their NCLB right to transfer out of such schools, much attention has been given to providing more and better information to parents. While that is certainly important, working to correct the disincentives in the program from the school's side of the equation must also be part of the solution.

Barbara R. Davidson is the President of StandardsWork, Inc. and the Project Director of Parent Power Works.