

The Atlanta Business Chronicle

January 20, 2012

Must Families Wander for 40 More Years?

By Jim Kelly

During the fifteen years that I have been working on the cause of education reform in Georgia, there have been many times when opponents of expanded parental choices in K-12 education have insisted that reforms must take place within the context of local public school systems. Yet, when asked, these individuals never have an answer to the question of how long families must wait for this internal reform to occur? My recent research indicates that they have been waiting quite a long time.

Forty years ago, the Taconic Foundation, which was an early supporter of the U.S. civil rights movement, commissioned a study by the Institute for Community Studies at the City University of New York on the fledgling community school movement. Concerned about the declining performance of public schools in urban school districts serving large minority populations, and the resistance of school officials to change, the Taconic Foundation thought parent-controlled community schools might offer a solution.

Based on a study of 30 community schools in cities across America, the resulting report (published in December 1970) called for the expansion of two different community school models.

The first model, dubbed “Public Subsystems,” consisted of 17 schools that represented efforts to transform a regular public school program into one in which greater control is exercised by the parents, residents, and students of the school community. Unbeknownst to the researchers, they had stumbled upon the inception of what is now known as the local public charter school movement.

The second model, referred to as “Independent Community Schools,” consisted of 13 schools that represented efforts of parents to create independent schools in which they have full decision-making power. However, in an attempt to secure public funding, school organizers agree to operate with greater transparency and accountability than a traditional private school.

Thus, four decades ago, a respected civil rights foundation identified two possible community school models that could serve as a springboard for education reform. In one of the concluding paragraphs of their report, these pioneers spoke “truth to power:”

“Public school educators must stop being so protective of their monopoly. It only serves to limit severely the options of low-income families; the well-to-do already can choose a private school or move to a new community. If public systems are unwilling to create or tolerate real alternatives, aid to non-public schools and parent voucher systems must be enacted on a broad scale.”

Unfortunately, the 1970 report resulted in a call to action different than the one intended. Since that time, the public school establishment has effectively squashed the independent community school model. In Georgia, these opponents of reform benefitted from the 2011 decision of the Georgia Supreme Court striking down a law that permitted a state commission to contract with charter school organizers who had been denied a contract by their local school boards to operate a public charter school. In spite of the fact that the state invests billions in helping local school systems educate their students, the Court decided that, under the Georgia Constitution, local school systems have exclusive authority over the delivery of public education in Georgia.

Thus, Georgia is left with two options: local government-run public schools and private schools. Yet, this result could open the door for independent community schools. These community schools could be created and operated by non-profit entities in partnership with parents, civic groups, and businesses. The community schools would not require a charter from the state or local school boards-- they would grow organically to meet the needs and demands of Georgia families and communities in crisis.

Fortunately, a provision added to the Georgia Constitution in 1983 expressly permits the state to provide educational assistance grants to students and their parents to use for educational purposes. In turn, the recipients of educational assistance could choose to use it at qualified community schools. To become qualified, a community school would have to agree to meet certain conditions established by the state to ensure that the school is operating in a transparent and accountable manner.

The ability of Georgia to create another vehicle for the delivery of K-12 education would place it in the unique and enviable position of playing a leadership role in national

education reform circles. Parents would be able to choose from among local public schools, local public charter schools, independent community schools, and, due to Georgia's ultra-successful tuition tax credit scholarship program, private schools.

Georgia families should not have to wait 40 more years. Let's get started.

Jim Kelly is the President of Solidarity Center for Law and Justice, P.C., an Atlanta-based civil and human rights law firm. He is a Senior Fellow at the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.