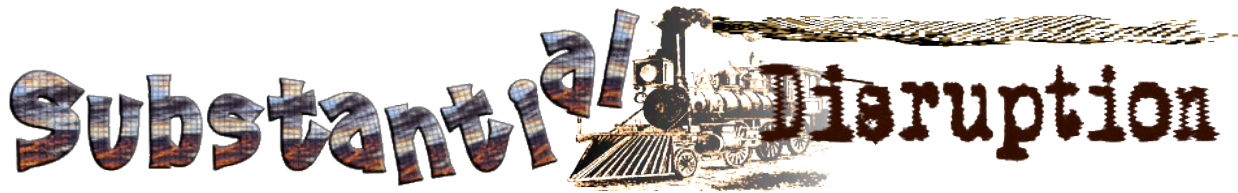


Substantial Disruption



Voucher Movement Cynically Using Bullying to Bully Schools

By Mike Tully

A rich, robust, well-resourced public education is one of the best routes out of poverty and a pathway to prosperity.

- Randi Weingarten

The voucher movement has plumbed a cynical new low in its relentless effort to reallocate public funds from traditional public schools to private and parochial schools. Their latest gimmick is the “Child Safety Account” (CSA), which would allow parents to use public funds to send their children to private or parochial schools if their students were bullied or if they were afraid they might be. The proposal is being marketed as an anti-bullying provision, but it’s actually an anti-public education tactic that would do nothing to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools.

In April, the [Heartland Institute](#) unveiled its proposal for CSAs in a [Policy Brief](#) entitled, “Protecting Students with Child Safety Accounts.” The Institute expresses dedication to “free-market solutions to social and economic problems,” a mission it advances by opposing bans on smoking in public places, denying the existence of climate change, opposing the Affordable Care Act and advocating fracking. It [refuses to identify its funding sources](#), which historically included oil and tobacco companies.

The Institute defines a “Child Safety Account” as a program “which would allow parents to immediately have their child moved to a safe school — be it private, parochial, or public school — as soon as parents feel the public school their child is currently attending is too dangerous to their child’s physical or emotional health.” The CSAs would be “education savings accounts parents can use to pay for tuition, fees, and other education-related expenses at public schools, private schools, and even for homeschooling.”

“With an ESA,” reads the Brief, “state education funds allocated for a child are placed in a parent-controlled savings account. Parents are then able to use a state-provided, restricted-use debit card to access the funds to pay for the resources chosen for their child’s unique educational program, such as tuition at a private or parochial school, tutoring, online classes, transportation, specialized therapies, textbooks, and even college courses for students still in high school. Funds can also be used to cover the fees required to take national standardized achievement tests, such as the SAT or ACT. Unused ESA funds can be rolled over from year to year and saved to pay for future college expenses.”

Given the generosity of the CSAs, one would expect the Institute to recommend that parents’ subjective impressions be evaluated by an outside body. The Institute disdains any quality control, leaving the decision exclusively to parents. “(N)o one has a greater vested interest in a child’s success than that child’s parents or guardians, which is why parents should be the one to trigger a CSA, not school bureaucrats,” states the Brief. “The final decision should rest with parents alone.” Any parent or guardian can say he or she has a “reasonable fear” their students are not safe at school and the state opens an account, no questions asked. That provision would bankrupt public schools.

The Brief is in two parts. The first lists potential dangers in the school environment that provide a basis for relocating the student. The first potential danger identified in the Brief is bullying. The second part advocates for Child Safety Accounts.

The Institute framed its argument as a remedy for the low number of “persistently dangerous” schools, as defined by federal law. “Because states define unsafe schools narrowly,” they write, “fewer than 50 public schools out of nearly 100,000 are labeled persistently dangerous each year.” Students at “persistently dangerous” schools are permitted to transfer to another school, so the argument is less persuasive for states with open enrollment, like Arizona. The Institute identified states where statistics indicate a high rate of bullying, then adds state-specific data to a [template](#) published on April 25th. As the Institute gathers data about school bullying in specific states, it replaces generic opening paragraphs with a paragraph or two aimed at the state. The goal is to motivate a local publication to run the article, thereby introducing CSAs as a policy the state should adopt. The Institute has authored versions for Tennessee, Chicago, Maryland, Arkansas, Missouri, Idaho and Wyoming. The latter four used a [recent Wallet Hub study](#) on bullying entitled, “States With the Biggest Bullying Problem.” Those four were in the top ten.

It’s not reasonable to expect the Institute and its allies to confine their efforts to the Wallet Hub “top ten” or the other states it targeted, like Maryland (ranked 22nd) and Tennessee (ranked 33rd). Even Arizona, with its rank of 32nd and open enrollment, is a likely target, given a legislature that consistently expands the State’s voucher program. The voucher movement is national in scope and the Institute will eventually bring CSA’s to your state.

Everybody wants safe schools, but the Institute is using the universal support for them to cynically whip up fear and advocate a drastic solution that would cripple public schools and provide a windfall for private and parochial schools. Ignore language in the Brief that says CSAs could be used to attend public schools. It’s unlikely that parents who think a public school is too dangerous would consider another one. Moreover, redistribution of wealth from the public sector will eliminate public schools as an option. The CSA gimmick has nothing to do with school safety. Bullying happens in private and parochial schools, so it’s illogical to assume that a child can escape bullying simply by being placed in one. Furthermore, parochial schools are exempt from civil rights statutes, not to mention laws against bullying in schools, which only apply to the public sector. Due process in private schools is voluntary, not legally required. The suggestion that CSAs will protect children and inspire school reform is nonsense.

The Institute is not involved in education; it’s engaged in social engineering and is trying to conscript American school children into its culture war. The Institute is a soldier of fortune, using its oil and tobacco money to damage our health and environment. Public education built a great nation by opening the door to every student and parent, regardless of their status. We need to increase its funding, not bleed it away in pursuit of a radical agenda.

We can’t let these people anywhere near our kids.