

A GI Bill for Kids

■ Everyone whose knees jerk at the mention of school choice (which means almost everyone) should pause to consider Diane Ravitch's argument ("Somebody's Children," fall issue): "*Nobody's children* should be compelled to attend a bad public school."

I graduated from wonderful public schools. I have also walked the halls of bad ones. Not many children whose families have money are in the bad ones. We therefore risk, in this magnificent age of telecommunications, creating a permanent underclass. The best ticket from the back to the front of the line is, has always been, a strong family and a good education.

Government policy cannot make every poor family a strong family, but it *could* offer a scholarship that would permit every poor family to choose the best school for their children. Call it a GI bill for kids. How, in America in the 1990s, could this even be an issue? *Nobody's children* should be forced to attend a bad public school.

Lamar Alexander, formerly
U.S. Secretary of Education

Fresh Paint and Choice

■ Diane Ravitch smelled fresh paint in a publicly funded religious school in London and became a convert to private school choice. While I am moved by the feeling and faith Diane Ravitch expresses, when it comes to policy, evidence is a more prudent guide. Ravitch presents virtually no evidence and neglects some key facts.

First, private school choice really means that the schools get to choose the students. That's a hallmark of private schools, and they insist on preserving that right. Some private schools will admit some poor children with vouchers. But like the poor children now admitted to private schools, they will be the ones who achieve at

grade level, have no behavioral problems, and pass muster, along with their parents, during interviews. If Ravitch wants all public schools to have the same right to select their students, let's have that debate instead of pretending that the main barrier to any child's access to private school is money.

Second, once you control for family background, there is virtually no difference in student achievement between public and private schools. There are good and bad public and private schools, but both sectors are far from where we need to be. Moreover, some schools that appear "good" are just good at getting an advantaged student body, while some that look "bad" actually take their disadvantaged youngsters a long way from where they started. What kind of "worst" schools does Ravitch mean? Why isn't she worrying about worst students? And why does her voucher design only help schools that can pick the best low-income students?

Third, Ravitch says that to be eligible for publicly funded vouchers, private schools must agree to not teach racial or religious hatred, to obey civil rights laws, to accept state educational standards, and to be "monitored by state agencies responsible for assuring both equity and excellence." This of course recognizes that the same rules, tests, and accountability systems that the public applies to public schools should apply to private schools that accept public dollars. What it doesn't recognize is that such oversight would require a whole new and costly bureaucracy, breach the wall between church and state, and end the independence of private schools.

Helping all American children involves carrying on the fight that Ravitch was recently part of: for high academic standards, discipline, and making effort and achievement count

for students. We're closer to getting there than we've ever been, though it's tough going. I regret that Ravitch decided to switch rather than fight.

Albert Shanker, American
Federation of Teachers

Make Schools Work

■ Inner-city public schools in poor neighborhoods are struggling. To borrow Jonathan Kozol's apt phrase, savage inequalities persist in American education. What is to be done? Many things we need can wait; our children cannot.

Diane Ravitch's proposal, unfortunately, would siphon money away from city public schools to private schools or to suburban public schools. How else would her means-tested scholarships get paid for? Higher taxes? That's political suicide, as everyone knows.

The solution is not to abandon urban public schools, but to make them work. If parents, public school educators, and the community work together as partners, it can be done. It is being done—today—in ethnically diverse public schools across the country: Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee, Horace Mann Middle School in San Francisco, Longfellow Elementary School in Riverside, east of Los Angeles, to name a few. These innovative public schools are educating children of all colors and educating them well. But we need many more.

Now is not the time to give up on public education. We must revitalize inner-city public schools. The mean streets surrounding these schools make the job harder, but not impossible.

Keith Geiger, National
Education Association

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Brookings President

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THE BROOKINGS REVIEW

Editor

Brenda Szittyia

Production

Susan F. Woollen

Proofreader

Ellen Garshick

Advertising/Marketing

Jill Bernstein
(202) 797-6254

Circulation

Renuka Deonarain
Ann M. McDuffie

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After the Electoral Earthquake

BY THOMAS E. MANN

The political shock waves from the 1994 midterm election continue to reverberate in Washington. For once, the orgy of punditry seems commensurate with the event.

The extraordinary dimensions of the Republican party sweep are by now familiar. The GOP captured control of both houses of Congress only two years into Bill Clinton's presidency, finally ending 40 years of minority status in the House. Republicans surged to a dominant position in the states by controlling 30 governorships, including the top post in eight of the nine largest states, as well as by registering large gains in state legislative contests. And they completed the partisan realignment of the South, which is well on its way to becoming as safe at all levels of elective office for the Republicans as it long was for the Democrats.

What will this seismic event mean for politics and policy in the United States?

Clearly, the immediate political advantage lies with the Republicans, in particular with Speaker Newt Gingrich and his lieutenants in the House. The startling end to the seemingly permanent Democratic rule in the House, combined with the boldness of the Republican Contract with America, ensures a dramatic change in the agenda of political debate and legislative deliberation. An aggressively conservative Republican majority in Congress, empowered by an electorate whose decisive swing voters vented their economic and cultural frustrations by lashing out against the party of government, will try to seize the initiative from a beleaguered president. Indeed, the Republicans are in an excellent position to deliver sustenance to their key supporters by moving quickly to reform internal congressional arrangements and to send a balanced budget constitutional amendment to the

states, all before they advance ambitious proposals to revamp tax, spending, and regulatory policies and to return power to the states.

Of course, our separated system of government places many obstacles in the path of any party claiming an electoral mandate to change policy course. That system is often assailed for its proclivity for gridlock, and gridlock may well be the order of the day for the 104th Congress. Divided government at a time of ideological polarization between parties, small Republican majorities in both houses, differences between House and Senate Republicans, and the prospect of Senate filibusters and presidential vetoes do not augur well for political harmony and legislative productivity. The November sweep and Bill Clinton's weakened political standing also ensure an early and aggressively confrontational GOP presidential campaign, which will not facilitate compromise between the branches.

But before assuming the worst for governance in the months ahead, it's worth reminding ourselves of the opportunities voters provided politicians in the midterm elections and how those opportunities might be seized.

The dramatic reversal of fortunes for Republicans in Congress offers a serious chance for constructive reform of congressional operations and for a halt to the Congress bashing that has so eroded the legitimacy of the first branch of government. At last, House Republicans have a stake in their institution. Now it's time for them to stop their guerrilla war against Congress and to assume responsibility for improving and leading it. Both chambers, but especially the Senate, need to constrain the intense individualism that has lately plagued Congress and



to improve its capacity for genuine deliberation. Another early test will come with the promised vote on a constitutional amendment to limit the terms of members of Congress. The voters have just demonstrated emphatically why term limits are unnecessary. Now a GOP-led Congress must buck the pressure of the term-limits movement and reject this radical proposal that would weaken Congress and democratic accountability.

Republicans must also show how the slogans of lower taxes and less spending can responsibly guide federal budget policy and address the underlying sources of economic insecurity among citizens. Policy choices and stakes should be clearer in this new political environment. At the very least, voters might be forced to confront tradeoffs and inconsistencies that have long eluded them.

For their part, Democrats must confront the reality of the collapse of the New Deal coali-

tion and develop a new public philosophy for attracting broad public support. President Clinton faces an especially daunting challenge in adapting his policy ambitions to the new political conditions and conducting his presidency in a manner that garners him the respect necessary to carry on.

Elections are blunt instruments of democratic control. Relatively few citizens meet the highest standards of informed participation in the electoral process. Yet changing sentiments among a small fraction of the electorate can—and did—transform the political landscape. Now it is up to our elected officials to make something constructive of it. ■

Thomas E. Mann is director of the Brookings Governmental Studies program and W. Averill Harriman Senior Fellow in American Governance.