

A voucher scheme brings back unwelcome memories

By Jan Collins

Published: March 31, 2005

The
Economist

Columbia, South Carolina

In 1984, Mark White, then governor of Texas, gave South Carolina's Governor Richard Riley a pair of cowboy boots. Mr. Riley promptly vowed that the boots would stay on his feet until the South Carolina legislature passed his package to reform the public schools. Several weeks later, he prised them off. After an election-style campaign, his cherished Education Improvement Act had got through. It ushered in one of the country's most successful programmes—so successful that, on the strength of it, Mr. Riley became Bill Clinton's secretary of education.

South Carolina's current governor, Mark Sanford, who is a Republican, is now campaigning as hard for another controversial education bill, which Mr. Riley is opposing. Mr. Sanford's Put Parents in Charge Act would provide tuition tax-credits to parents who want to teach their children at home or send them to private or parochial schools. Competition from private schools, he feels, will force public schools to improve.

Mr. Sanford's proposal is not actually a full-blooded voucher programme—he is offering tax-credits for private education rather than direct help. But the prospect of parents choosing where to spend their education money has stirred up opposition from familiar sources—particularly from teachers groups and their allies in the Democratic Party.

Inez Tenenbaum, the state superintendent of education, moans that Mr. Sanford's scheme would cripple the public-school system. According to a Census Bureau report, South Carolina already spends less per pupil than 31 other states; Mr Sanford's scheme would be paid for out of the state's general revenues, so it would mean less money for other public services, including schools and their teachers.

Less predictably, blacks, who make up 30% of the state's population, also oppose the bill. This seems strange, since voucher schemes have proved very popular among black parents elsewhere (they offer an escape out of the wretched urban schools where so few Democratic honchos choose to send their own children). But in South Carolina, where the Confederate flag was taken down from the statehouse dome only a few years ago, the proposed legislation has quite different historical connotations

Blacks remember that in 1963 South Carolina's governor and legislature, determined not to integrate the public schools, attempted to help white students go to private schools by giving them tuition grants; this was called "freedom of choice." Three years later the Supreme Court ruled the Tuition Grants Act unconstitutional.

Now opponents say that tuition tax-credits would effectively re-segregate the state's schools, with whites fleeing to private schools and public schools becoming increasingly black. This has been the trend for some time (Mr Sanford is not the first white in the state to send his children to private schools). But opponents claim the new bill would speed up the process.

Religion, too, is hovering just off centre-stage in the tuition tax-credit debate. Conservative Christian groups are staunch backers of the idea, which would certainly help home-schooling and religious schools. If Mr. Sanford gets the bill through, it would surely help any ambitions he has to run for the presidency in 2008.

Whatever their ultimate fate in South Carolina, there is no doubt that tuition tax-credits are gaining in popularity across America as a form of “vouchers lite”. Six states—Minnesota, Iowa, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Arizona—have statewide tax-credit programmes, most of them approved in the past few years. In Arizona, a bill is making its way through the legislature that would expand tuition tax-credits so that corporations could provide scholarships for students who want to transfer from public to private schools. But in all these states, race is a less emotional issue than it is in South Carolina.