

# THE UGLY POLITICS OF PARENTAL CHOICE OPONENTS

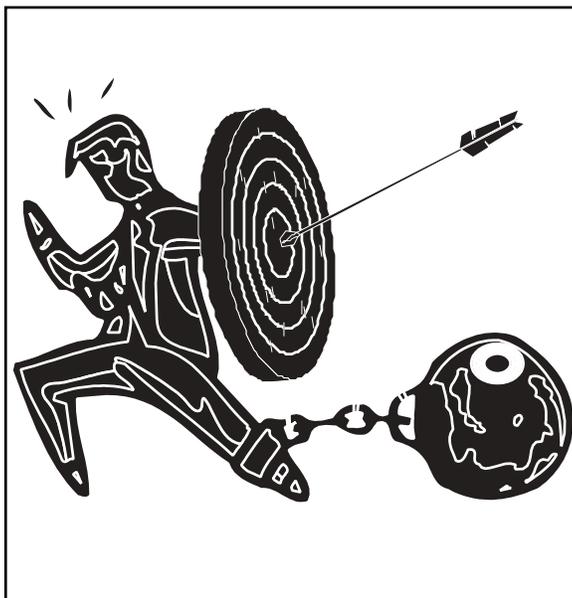
GEORGE MITCHELL

**W**ould you support a program that allows a convicted rapist to run a taxpayer-supported school? Danny Goldberg does.”

That message, delivered to Milwaukee voters during an April 2005 school board campaign, highlights a tactic increasingly used in the fight against programs that expand parental education options. For opponents of parental choice, the electoral defeat of choice supporters is an end that justifies the means. No lie, distortion, or smear is off-limits if it damages a candidate who supports parental choice programs.

In Goldberg’s case, he sought a pivotal seat on the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Board of Directors. While his politics are decidedly liberal, Goldberg’s longstanding support for school choice put a bulls-eye on his back. Wisconsin Citizen Action—labeled a “public interest” group in the news pages of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*—mailed three attack pieces in the six days preceding the April 5 election. All distorted Goldberg’s views and misrepresented the operation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP).<sup>1</sup>

The inflammatory sex predator claim was premised on the fact that the director of a former



school in the MPCP had a 30-year old sexual assault conviction. Not mentioned in the Citizen Action literature: (1) the school has been expelled from the MPCP, and (2) Goldberg for years has pushed for measures that would bar such schools from the choice program.

Goldberg narrowly won. While he ran a strong grassroots campaign before the hate mail arrived, he might not have

prevailed but for another development in the school choice movement, namely, growing political activity by school choice backers. They provided substantial financial backing so Goldberg could get his message out in the campaign’s final days. (Kevin Ronnie, another candidate targeted by choice opponents, did not fare as well. He was on the receiving end of identical Wisconsin Citizen Action smears. Lacking Goldberg’s organizational and financial support, Ronnie lost soundly.)

The bare knuckles approach to campaigns marks a relatively new phase in the Wisconsin strategy of school choice opponents. Historically, they have focused on legislative halls, where they try to defeat choice bills, and the courts, where they seek to strike down pro-

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grams that pass. Finally, when those efforts have failed, such as in Wisconsin, choice opponents seek to strangle choice programs with administrative regulations.

This emerging effort to take out choice supporters at the polls is, of course, a legitimate tactic. That's democracy. Four things are striking about how this approach has developed in Wisconsin.

**First**, the willingness of choice opponents to strike below the belt is notable. The attacks on Goldberg echo claims in 2003 from then-Senator Gwen Moore, who said on the floor of the state Senate that choice supporters had made Milwaukee a "magnet for pedophiles." Meanwhile, choice opponents in the state Assembly effectively accused MPCP backers of taking bribes.

**Second**, so far the effort largely has failed. Parental choice supporters have won a majority of Milwaukee school board elections since 1999. Statewide, candidates seeking to win legislative elections by bashing choice have failed miserably.

**Third**, choice supporters have become politically active. In 2002, they played a direct role in ousting choice opponents from control of the State Senate. In 2003, they provided key support for a victorious Supreme Court candidate. Last year, they helped stave off attacks on several out-state choice supporters in the State Assembly; in the process, choice opponents actually lost seats.

**Fourth**, by acquiescing to tactics of choice opponents (mainly teacher unions), Democratic legislators have weakened legislative support in Madison for programs that generally benefit urban constituents—the very people that Democrats overwhelmingly represent.

Depending on how these trends unfold, the future of the MPCP is anything but certain. If most Democratic legislators continue to sit on their hands when the MPCP is attacked, program opponents could prevail in the long run. Why? If Milwaukee legislators won't back a program that benefits thousands of their constituents, out-state Republicans eventually will tire of doing so.

As the nation's oldest and largest urban voucher program, the MPCP lets nearly 15,000 students from low-income families choose from more than 100 private schools, options that otherwise would be beyond their reach.

In the early 1990s, program supporters envisioned a day when it might be politically safe, or at least stable. Arbitrarily, many thought that 10,000 students might be the magic number. If the program survived to become that large, the worst would be behind them.

Naïve is a kind word for this delusional assumption.

Indeed, it now is clear that the larger and more successful the Milwaukee program becomes, the more political danger it faces. Teacher unions view parental choice as a mortal threat; if programs such as the MPCP spread to other cities and states, union treasuries will hemorrhage.

Consider the impact on unions of the MPCP and a separate Milwaukee program of non-union charter schools. Union dues are cut about \$750,000 a year as a result of these programs. For union leaders, that means anything is justified if it leads to the downfall of the MPCP. They believe the place to stop choice is Milwaukee, and the time to stop it is now. They want nothing so badly as to be able to declare that choice "failed" in Milwaukee.

That message forcefully was delivered to me and other parental choice supporters during an early 2001 meeting with former Wisconsin Senate Majority Leader Charles Chvala. With Michael Butera, former executive director of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), Democrat Chvala bluntly explained that parental choice was ripe "to take a hit." He said that the first salvo would come that very day, when Senator Russ Decker proposed legislation to cut drastically the level of financial support for the MPCP.

Three factors encouraged Chvala, Butera, and Decker: (1) former Governor Tommy Thompson, a choice stalwart, had left for the cabinet of President Bush; (2) Milwaukee

Mayor John Norquist, another strong choice backer, faced difficulties that eventually caused him not to seek re-election; and (3) in the fall 2000 elections, Decker and others misled voters throughout the state into thinking that the MPCP was raising their property taxes. For these reasons, as the 2001 legislative session opened, the MPCP was in its most vulnerable position in years. Indeed, Decker's misinformation had "worked" so well that legislative supporters of choice advised MPCP supporters that backing for the program had eroded.

To make matters worse, Milwaukee Democrats subordinated their constituents to the WEAC-Chvala-Decker agenda. As a result, in the spring of 2001 the full Senate approved Decker's plan to gut choice. Two developments saved the MPCP. First, a report from the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau showed Decker's fiscal claims to be wrong. Second, Assembly Republicans did what Milwaukee Democrats would not. They blocked the Chvala-Decker plan.

The following year, 2002, Chvala and Decker repeated their attack on school choice. The Democratic Senate, again with votes from Milwaukee Democrats, once more voted to curtail the MPCP. Assembly Republicans again stepped up to save the program.

The Chvala-Decker assaults were a wake-up call for school choice backers. Our illusions about the program being politically stable were gone. Chvala, Decker, and WEAC made that clear. As Stan Johnson, the WEAC president, matter-of-factly stated in a 2002 letter to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "WEAC believes the voucher program should be repealed."

Throughout the 1990s, WEAC and Democrats had used lies and misinformation in legislative halls to pursue that goal.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 2000, they began employing this

tactic in legislative campaigns. One common claim: the supposed effect of financing Milwaukee choice programs was to cut school aid to outstate districts and thus force property taxes higher. A steady stream of reports from the nonpartisan and highly respected Legislative Fiscal Bureau has refuted these claims. Indeed, as the reports point out, *ending Milwaukee choice programs would cut aid and raise taxes in outstate districts.*

What is notable, so far, is how unsuccessful choice opponents have been in achieving their political goals. Since 2000, parental choice opponents have experienced a net loss of five seats in the Wisconsin Assembly and three seats in the Wisconsin Senate. The Senate losses cost Democrats control of that body.

The WEAC-Democratic strategy of attacking choice has backfired in part because Milwaukee's school choice coalition has responded. The coalition has organized itself into several different arms to carry out public information, issue advocacy, and direct support of candidates. Actions include:

1. Campaign contributions to Democratic and Republican candidates who support parental choice programs.
2. Volunteer activity on behalf of these candidates.
3. Use of direct mail and radio for issue advocacy during campaigns.
4. Public information to counter teacher union and Democratic Party misrepresentations.

These actions foster bipartisan support for—and honest discussion of—programs that expand educational options.

In the political realm, the parental choice coalition is bipartisan.

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Democratic candidates backed by the coalition include Senator Jeff Plale, who won a 2003 special election to represent a Milwaukee County district, and Representative Jason Fields, elected on November 2 to represent Milwaukee's 11th Assembly District. The coalition actively seeks to increase the number of urban Democrats who will stand up for school choice.

Republicans backed by the coalition include a contingent of legislators attacked by WEAC and Democrats for supporting programs that expand educational options. In 2003 and 2004, the Fund for Choices in Education (FCE), a Wisconsin political conduit, has raised and contributed tens of thousands of dollars to these officials. Through a separate organization—All Children Matter (ACM)—supporters of parental choice conducted an issue advocacy campaign in areas of the state where misinformation about school choice was most widespread.

While WEAC and Democratic Party spending dwarfs the efforts of the choice coalition, it so far has failed to erode legislative support for parental choice.

#### Senate

- In 2002, the choice coalition helped oust anti-school choice Democrats from majority control. This was a direct response to the 2001 and 2002 Chvala wake-up call.
- In 2004, the coalition supported a candidate from western Wisconsin, Dan Kapanke, who won an open seat previously held by a parental choice opponent.

#### Assembly

- In 2002, the coalition participated in a dozen highly competitive Assembly races and helped expand the group of legislators in that chamber who support parental choice.
- In 2004, WEAC and the Democratic Party tried—and failed miserably—to use parental choice as a weapon against candidates. Indeed, the choice coalition played a key role in helping to expand the base of Assembly support for parental choice.

In Milwaukee, Goldberg's election means that a majority of MPS board members support parental choice as one method of improving educational outcomes in the state's largest city. This is why choice opponents were willing to stoop so low in trying to stop him.

While there is little doubt that WEAC's attack on school choice will continue and perhaps intensify, an unanswered question is whether Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, a Democrat, and Democratic legislators from Milwaukee, will sit back and let that happen.

Quietly, some Milwaukee Democrats are beginning to grasp that the WEAC effort against choice could produce a backlash against Milwaukee and other urban areas in the state. If Republicans who stand up for Milwaukee parental choice face political repercussions at home (however unwarranted), this does not bode well for Milwaukee's broader legislative agenda in Madison.

Here's how the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* sized up the situation: "The state teachers union and Democratic candidates are fanning upstate resentment of Milwaukee. . . for the sake of short-term political gain. . . . Some friends to cities this union and these Democrats are."

For all the support and supposed political muscle of WEAC, it's hard to see that Democrats have benefited from the close alliance. Their numbers in the Legislature have shrunk. The party might be in much stronger shape if it embraced a policy—parental choice—that is widely supported by the general public.

#### Notes

- 1 The *Journal Sentinel's* editorial page called the last minute attacks "a disappointing smear campaign by Wisconsin Citizen Action, which twisted his support for the worthwhile private school choice program...."
- 2 At <[www.schoolchoiceinfo.org](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org)>, see "Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers," Howard Fuller and Kaleem Caire, Institute for the Transformation of Learning, Marquette University, April 2001, and "The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions about Educational Vouchers," Howard Fuller, Institute for the Transformation of Learning, March 2000.