

The Democratic Leadership Council: An Explanation of the Organization through an Examination of Education Policy

By John Lyman

Founded in 1984 by a group of moderate Southern politicians, the Democratic Leadership Council's goal was to move the Democratic Party toward the center of the political spectrum. Although it struggled at first the DLC caught a break in 1992 when Bill Clinton, one of the organization's founders, was elected President. Since then the DLC has grown in size and become a major factor in national politics and policy making. The organization has achieved its success by pioneering a "Third Way" of approaching the problems that confront the nation. Instead of being couched in the old terms of "liberal" and "conservative," the DLC has moved the debate above partisan politics and toward logical solutions. Many feel that this move toward the center is the wave of the future in politics. But simply talking about the "Third Way" in an abstract manner is confusing. This essay, by taking one issue — in this case education reform — and examining ideas held by liberals, conservatives and "Third Wayers," is an endeavor to make the purpose of the DLC more easily understood.

INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) was formed in 1985 by a group of moderate Democrats who sought to refocus the goals of their party. Those who joined the organization felt that on the national level the Democrats no longer connected with middle-class America. These New Democrats, as they called themselves, wanted to create a "Third Way" to deal with America's problems, a way that was not necessarily conservative or liberal but was instead the most logical approach to resolving issues. The newly formed DLC argued that one of the biggest problems in politics was that with so many competing factions and interest groups the best ideas often get pushed aside. They sought to rise above partisan politics and focus on solutions to problems. Although they denied that their policies simply split the difference between the left and the right, critics immediately charged that the Third Way is a form of moderate politics that seeks to please the greatest number of people by offering ideas that offend the fewest.

What exactly does the term Third Way mean? Is it prop-

aganda created by the DLC to sell itself? Or is it the best way to approach crime, health care, pollution, and the other problems that confront our country today? Perhaps the best way to understand the Third Way is to take one area of reform and compare the ideas of the liberal Brookings Institution, the conservative Heritage Foundation, and the Third Way Democratic Leadership Council.

HISTORY OF THE DLC

The Democratic Leadership Council had its roots in a hot, humid evening in the midst of the dog days of summer in San Francisco. The year was 1984 and the Democratic Party had just nominated former Vice President Walter Mondale to be its presidential candidate for the fall elections. It was a time of hope for the Democrats. They controlled both houses of Congress, had twenty more state governorships than the GOP and held mayoral positions in many large American cities. But they had one underlying problem: Apart from electing Jimmy Carter in 1976 in the aftermath of Watergate they had lost every presidential election since 1964. Their party did not connect with the American people on a national level.

Many Democrats thought Walter Mondale could change all of that. With him in the White House they would control the executive and legislative branches of the national government. They would be able to deliver their policies to the American people.

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Three months after that joyous day in San Francisco, President Ronald Reagan carried 49 states in the presidential election, losing only Mondale's home state of Minnesota and the solidly Democratic District of Columbia. Some Democrats thought that Mondale was a poor candidate. Others thought that Ronald Reagan was too popular. Still others believed that the Republicans were better organized at a national level and were thus better equipped to persuade Americans that their policies were better than the Democrats'.

But a small group of moderate Democrats led by Al From, Will Marshall, Senators Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, Charles Robb of Virginia, John Breux of Louisiana, and Al Gore of Tennessee, thought differently. This group of influential men — along with a then little-known Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton — believed there was something fundamentally wrong with their party. A Democrat could win on the local level. A Democrat could even do well on the state level. But when it came to the presidency something was wrong and the usual excuses — the Republicans had better candidates, more money, and better organization — were just not going to cut it. None of that could explain how the GOP won 49 out of 50 states in a presidential election in what was supposed to be a competitive two-party system.

According to the New Democrats something was wrong with the party's ideas. The Democratic Party took a group of various interests — union workers, minorities, environmentalists, feminists — and tried to put them all under one banner. What was missing in the Democratic Party was a core identity. There needed to be goals and specific policies tailored for practical use instead of ones created to please the largest number of special interest groups. The Republicans had had great success during the 1960s and 1970s with policy ideas that had come from conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, and now the Democrats wanted to catch up.

Thus the Democratic Leadership Council was born. Its immediate goal was to elect a Democratic president. The earliest year the "New Democrats" hoped to do this was 1996; anything earlier they thought would be impossible because of the lack of prominent Democrats who believed in the new ideals that would be required to win (Marshall 1998). To achieve their goal, the DLC decided that the Democrats, as a party, needed to be more moderate. They realized that moving the party to the center was easier than trying to move the American people to the left. Starting as a small group of mostly white, Southern men, they began to recruit actively on a national level. They were looking for Democrats who were dissatisfied with the way things were going, and for elected officials who cared more about winning elections with common sense politics than winning intellectual arguments.

There were, without a doubt, setbacks. One of the DLC's founders and chairmen, Richard Gephardt, dropped the New Democrat logo almost immediately after it had been attached to him and reverted to being a traditional liberal. Few New

Democrats could win leadership positions in either the House or the Senate, because of entrenched Democrats who were further to the left than they were. For a time the DLC floundered. Critics from both sides of the political spectrum said that their ideas would never work because moderate politics does not inspire people. The Democratic Leadership Council was a collection of centrist Democrats without a way to get their message or policies to the American people.

Then, in 1989, the executive director of the DLC, Al From, made a visit to Little Rock, Arkansas. There he asked Governor Bill Clinton to become Chairman of the DLC. Governor Clinton agreed, giving himself a national stage and giving the New Democrats the charismatic spokesman they so desperately needed.

The partnership worked well and carried over into the presidential election of 1992. Bill Clinton, running on a promise to fix the economy and moderate stances on welfare reform, crime, and the environment was able to defeat George Bush. The DLC had hit it big. One of its candidates, running on its ideas, had won the biggest election in the land. Once in office, however, President Clinton began to look more and more like a tried and true liberal. His position on gays in the military and his failed health care plan caused an abrupt decline in his approval ratings and led to huge Republican gains in Congress in 1994. While this was a setback politically for the president, it reaffirmed the DLC's position that the American people were more happy with a centrist Democrat as president than with a liberal one. Finally the DLC had established itself on the national political scene.

In 1989 the DLC had created an affiliated think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute. The PPI examined national problems that were under debate in Congress and came up with moderate solutions for them. Early on, the group focused on crime, the environment, public school reform and the economy. Later it would add Social Security reform and health care to the list. The Institute produced policy papers on a regular basis and launched a magazine, the *New Democrat*.

Today, the DLC is a large organization which has begun to affect the politics in this country but still has much to do. Perhaps the best approach to understanding the purpose of the DLC and the meaning of the Third Way is to examine one specific policy area. Education policy is a good choice because it involves pronounced differences between liberals, conservatives and New Democrats. All have different ideas of what changes need to be made in America's schools. In many cases Republicans and Democrats even disagree among themselves about what to do with the nation's schools. The best way to understand the debate while at the same time examining the Third Way is to look at the education proposals advocated by the Brookings Institution, Heritage Foundation, and Democratic Leadership Council.

PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICY

There is widespread concern among Americans today about the quality of education in today's public schools. In 1996, only 1 percent of Americans surveyed by the Gallup Organization gave the nation's public school system an A while 23 percent gave it a D or an F (Elam et al. 1996). In addition, 45 percent of American parents would choose to send their children to a different school if they could (Elam et al. 1996). Most would agree that there are a variety of problems with the public schools as opposed to one major problem with the educational system. The most common worries include falling test scores, school violence, the power of teachers' unions, teacher incompetence, and large class size.

With so many different problems there are just as many proposed solutions. Conservatives argue that parents need to be given "school choice." Under this proposal, the government would provide all families with vouchers or tax credits with which to send their children to school. With these vouchers educational power would be transferred from the government directly to parents. This plan would provide poor children with an immediate opportunity to leave their neighborhood schools and, the argument goes, enroll in better ones. Under a voucher system, schools would survive in a free market economy like many other businesses. Some form of standardized testing would be used to compare the schools, and innovation and improved student performance would be rewarded when more parents sent their children to the best schools. Schools that were unsafe, produced low test scores, or had poor teachers would either have to reform quickly or be phased out by market forces.

On the other hand, many liberals argue that the problem with public schools today is that funding is too low and is not properly distributed. Vouchers, they argue, attack the idea that education is a public good that should be available to all children. Community relationships are undermined when replaced by competition between individuals. Raising standards for promotion and graduation without increasing the resources available, they believe, sets up students for failure. Relying on standardized tests narrows the curriculum and encourages rote learning. Liberals believe that an increased focus on class "rank" harms solidarity among students and reduces education to a game of winners and losers. Most also support President Clinton's plan for national testing and increased funding to hire 100,000 more teachers.

Those at the DLC take a "Third Way" approach to education reform. Their basic vehicle for improving the quality of education in America is the charter school. These schools are freed from most of the traditional rules that apply to public schools, but are in turn held accountable for results measured by performance reviews (Sylvester 1997, 82). Many are also established to address specific needs or talents, including student disabilities such as deafness or blindness or certain concentrations such as music or dance. What this model provides is a focus on results; it exists only as long as it serves its

students well and attracts support from parents. But charter schools differ from private schools in that they are still held accountable to something besides market forces. In addition to supporting charter schools, the DLC has called for voluntary national academic standards, more teacher accountability, and an end to social promotion in which students are allowed to move onto the next grade simply because that is what the rest of their age group is doing. Also, the DLC believes that while reducing class size is important, teacher quality is what matters most to a student's learning.

THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

We first examine the proposals made by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. Scholars associated with the Heritage Foundation have argued that parents should be given some form of assistance with which to send their children to the school of their choice, and in the long run that America's schools should perhaps be privatized.

Significantly, the Foundation relies heavily on test scores for formulating its proposals. Many believe these tests are racially biased, improperly formatted, or are simply not a good measure of what a child should be learning. Many conservatives, however, make the assumption that standardized tests accurately reflect student performance.

With that in mind, the Heritage Foundation has called school choice — a concept that gives parents control over where their children go to school — "the most promising education reform in the country today" (Bolick 1997, 1). Heritage proposals to implement this idea generally fall into three categories: tax deductions and credits, targeted scholarships, and child-centered education funding.

Under current Minnesota law, residents get income tax deductions for expenses incurred in private or public schools, including private school tuition (Bolick 1997, 2). Those who favor these deductions argue that they give parents the opportunity to select the education that is best for their child without facing a financial penalty if they choose a private school. Many choice advocates prefer deductions and credits to an actual transfer of funds between the government and schools (such as would occur in a voucher system), because it increases the odds that the program will be regarded as constitutional, although it is essentially the same arrangement. Finding a system that will pass a constitutional challenge is critical at this juncture because the courts have yet to resolve the issue. It is also likely that there will never be one "final" ruling on public funds being used for private education, simply because there are so many points of dispute (states rights, separation of church and state, and other constitutional objections just to begin with).

One objection to tax deductions and credits is that they do not provide immediate benefit to economically disadvantaged families, although the Heritage Foundation believes this can be overcome by providing refundable tax credits (Bolick 1997, 2). Also, some critics say that the segment of the population that is targeted for tax reductions does not

have the cultural “know-how” to navigate this new system. Many worry that it is the economically disadvantaged children who would be left in subpar public schools.

In Milwaukee and Cleveland school choice programs have been implemented to help economically disadvantaged students in the form of targeted scholarships. In Milwaukee, as a trial program, 15 percent of underprivileged students have been allowed to use their share of state public funds (approximately \$3,800 per pupil) to pay tuition in private schools. Eligible students are chosen at random by lottery. In Cleveland, a similar trial gives scholarships worth 90 percent of tuition to be used at selected private schools. Other variations of this program exist in Maine and Vermont. While preliminary results seem encouraging, the programs are being used in a very small sample and more study needs to be done to determine just how effective they are (Bolick 1997, 3).

Perhaps the most comprehensive approach to education reform is the child-centered education funding plan. The idea is to join public and private school choice with a system in which the state would provide an equal amount of funds that follow the educational choices of each student. Money would no longer be sent to fund schools or school districts, but would instead follow individual students. Funds going to public schools would be placed under the direct control of the particular school. Ideally the system would foster decentralization, autonomy, and competition among schools, and would be completely neutral between religious and secular options (Bolick 1997, 3). Currently the idea of child-centered education funding is only in use in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, but if it fares well there it will most likely find its way to the mainland.

School privatization and the use of public funds for private schools, no matter what package it comes in, is the most far reaching of any of the educational reforms on the table today. It would completely revolutionize the way public education funds are spent and, in turn, would fundamentally change the way American students learn. In addition to being the most comprehensive plan, it is without a doubt the most controversial. Many view privatization as a sign that America has given up on the educational ideals that this country was built upon. Liberals argue that a move toward the private sector would create a rigid class stratification that would be socially damaging, and that school choice attacks the idea that quality education is a public good (Hechinger 1983, 168).

Conservatives argue that privatization simply offers too many advantages to be ignored. They dismiss the liberal argument that education is underfunded and point out that Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah are consistently among the top ten states in NEAP, ACT, and SAT test performance but are all in the bottom half of education funding (“School Reform Sweeps across Nation,” 1993, 5). In addition, by almost all accounts and measures, Washington, DC has the worst schools in the country yet has the highest per-capita spending. Later in this

paper the funding argument and its counter argument are examined, but let us for a moment assume that conservatives are correct when they say the answer to education problems is not more spending, nor even better allocation of the current funds. Is the answer privatization?

Proponents argue that the system allows good teachers to be rewarded (often in the form of higher salaries) and bad teachers to be fired. They also point out that studies show that poor children do better when taken out of their neighborhood schools and placed in private ones, in terms of grades, test scores, behavior, and success after school. In addition private schools are safer and — because they must compete in the market — generally cut costs where they can. Conservatives argue that private schools will not concentrate their funds on administration positions simply because they cannot afford to. In many cases the call for school choice comes from a segment of the population that has traditionally been a liberal bastion: inner-city African-Americans. Tired of the way their children have been educated in the last thirty years, they have joined forces with white conservatives to try to change the state of education in America today.

However, many critics question a school system that because it competes in an open market is able to “cut costs.” The importance of test scores leads some to wonder what will happen to the art, music, and athletic programs. In today’s world there is an increasing push to privatize government functions and make government respond to market forces, but privatization is certainly not a panacea for all of America’s problems. Liberals argue that if we want to produce a generation of children who have the ability to compete in a global economy there must be some government regulation to make sure things are going according to plan.

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Let us now turn our attention to the education reform ideas held by many liberals. They have led the education debate for the last thirty years and they are taking most of the heat for the state of education today. Recently, President Clinton proposed a budget in which funds were included to hire 100,000 new teachers. This budget was subsequently passed by Congress to the delight of many observers on the left and to the dismay of many on the right. George Will, a conservative columnist for *Newsweek*, went so far as to say that education in America today would actually improve more if 100,000 poor teachers were fired than if 100,000 potentially unqualified teachers were hired (Will 1997).

President Clinton also announced plans in his 1997 State of the Union address to create national academic standards. Again he was glorified by the left for improving education while at the same time vilified by the right for taking power away from the states. He has proposed tax credits and increased federal aid to reduce the cost of higher education, ideas Congress has gone along with. Whatever the results, President Clinton’s plans for education have the decided backing of the liberal establishment, evidenced by the

Brookings Institution proclamation that “at the federal level no president has done more to promote education than President Clinton” (Ravitch 1997, 1).

One idea put forth by the Brookings Institution is to require future high school teachers to have an academic major in the subject they intend to teach (Ravitch 1998a, 1). The idea is just one of many that would require teachers to adhere to a stricter set of certification guidelines than they currently do. This specific proposal is based on statistics that show that “out-of-field” teachers, meaning teachers who are teaching in subjects in which they have had neither a major nor a minor, make up a large portion of today’s educators. Approximately 40 percent of science teachers and 55 percent of history teachers do not have a major or minor in their area of teaching. In addition, many teachers majored in education as opposed to any academic field (Ravitch 1998a, 1). According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, student achievement is highest when teachers have an academic major plus appropriate certification.

Although many of these proposals appear to be non-controversial, the reality of the matter may be different. The first problem is that while everyone hopes that teachers become more educated in their field, what may happen is that fewer teachers will be given jobs because they do not have the proper qualifications. A brilliant history major, who also happens to be an excellent math teacher, may be disqualified from applying for an algebra teaching position. Some oppose the proposal because it is linked to federal funding and thus is viewed as an infringement by the national government on the rights of the states.

The Brookings Institution has also called for a change in the educational curriculum. Because of the growth of technology many argue that intensive job training will not be as important as it has been in years past. Instead, students should be taught reasoning skills, judgment, independence, and self-discipline — abilities that can be useful in any job situation. Children should also learn to use computers, understand the importance of history, learn other languages, and be accepting of other cultures. Schools should be smaller, enrolling no more than 100 students per grade, in order to achieve a sense of community and mutual concern (Ravitch 1985, 306-07).

Critics argue that however well intended these proposals, little thought has been given to how to implement them. For example, few would argue that students should not learn to use computers and that a high school with 400 students does not have a better sense of community than one with 2,000. But conservatives want to know from where the money comes to fund all of this. In essence, arguments like these sum up what liberal institutions have been saying for years: More funding leads to better teachers and resources, which in turn leads to better student performance. On the surface this argument seems valid. To many it logically follows that the more money spent on something the better it gets. But the available empirical evidence suggests otherwise.

In 1986 Eric Hanushek summarized the results of previous studies and wrote in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, that “There appears to be no strong or systematic relationship between school expenditures and student performance” (Hanushek 1986, 1162). While this assertion has been challenged by many educators, it has generally been accepted by economists who study the correlation between school resources and student achievement. Hanushek has also written that there is no noticeable evidence that teacher-pupil ratios or teacher pay have a significant effect on school achievement, factors that many educators proclaim are the key to solving education problems (Hanushek 1986, 1162). What Hanushek and others have agreed on is that individual teachers make a difference. Studies have shown that students enrolled in certain “good” teachers’ classes will, over time, perform noticeably better than those enrolled in ones taught by other teachers.

Those who claim the problem with education today is that funding is too low or that student-teacher ratios are too high are ignoring the data gathered on the subject. Study after study has shown that if all things are equal (something that is rarely found in today’s educational environment), funds and student-teacher ratio can make a slight difference, but that teacher quality is far more important. Some believe this is why in recent years the liberal establishment has all but lost control of the education debate it once led. Recent poll numbers show that the American public is finally losing confidence in liberal institutions to solve dilemmas in public education. Seventy-four percent of the public opposed the use of vouchers in education in 1993; in 1997, 52 percent did. The highest support came from blacks (72 percent) and those who had most recently left high school, 18-to-29-year-olds (70 percent) (Ravitch 1998b, 6).

Recently, even the Brookings Institution has had a change of heart on the issue. In a 1998 policy brief the Institution called for the usual “rigorous academic standards,” wrote that “districts that have been starved for resources . . . should get them,” and added, “schools must be held accountable for student performance.” But, near the end of this list the Institution also wrote that “choice should be encouraged by public authorities to stimulate higher performance” (Ravitch 1998b, 9). This represents an important change in Brookings Institution policy. Although teacher’s unions and other entrenched interests will probably never agree that school choice is a promising option, if other leftward leaning groups do meaningful reform may become easier.

THE DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

At the Democratic Leadership Council, education reform has long been an area in which a Third Way has been available to deal with the problems that plague America’s schools. The DLC has called for voluntary national academic standards, more teacher accountability, the end of social promotion, and the establishment of charter schools and charter districts. The New Democrats believe the main advantage of these

ideas is that they change the face of what is a stagnant educational environment without either spending billions of dollars or privatizing the nation's schools.

The idea behind national academic standards is that there is some level of learning that all American students should live up to at various stages of their educational career. President Clinton has proposed that fourth graders be tested in reading and eighth graders in math. Each student would receive an individual score that could give parents information about how their children are progressing compared to those students in other states and the nation as a whole. While some say that these tests would encourage rote learning, those at the DLC argue that by regulating the ends of education instead of the means, schools are actually given more leeway to experiment with teaching methods (Soler 1997, 3-5). The idea of national testing has drawn fire from both sides of the ideological spectrum. Liberals worry about disadvantaged minorities who may not pass the tests, and conservatives claim that testing is just one step toward an eventual federal takeover of public education.

Teacher accountability is also an issue that the DLC has continually raised as paramount to education reform. In "Addressing the Looming Teacher Crunch," Dale Ballou and Stephanie Soler (1998) wrote that, "The best way to ensure teacher quality is to hold teachers accountable for classroom performance. Administrators should be held accountable for classroom performance through increased parental choice and student examinations. In exchange, they should have the flexibility of merit pay and renewable contracts in lieu of rigid salary schedules and tenure." In other words, bad teachers should be fired and good ones should be paid more. This simple concept has been made impossible over the last thirty years because of the power of teachers' unions. Besides those special interests, however, few on the left or the right would dispute that teacher accountability must improve.

The DLC believes that teacher quality is far more important than teacher quantity. This idea goes against decades of liberal thought that has maintained that student-teacher ratio is the key to improving education. In fact, although the overall pupil-teacher ratio fell 35 percent from 1950 to 1995 (from 27-1 to 17-1), aggregate student performance has shown no improvement over this period. A thorough review of scientific data shows that class-size reduction may actually be one of the least effective educational investments (Hanushek 1998, 1).

Ending social promotion is also a goal of many New Democrats. The term "social promotion" refers to the practice of many school officials, especially in urban school districts, to allow students to move onto the next grade level simply because that is what the rest of their age group is doing. The fact that many students are not adequately prepared to move often does not matter to administrators. In Chicago, social promotion was the first problem to be addressed when control of the school system was given to Mayor Richard

Daley. One hundred thousand failing students were required to take summer school courses before they were allowed to move onto the next grade (Sylvester 1997, 89).

Critics of this plan argue that there is a reason why failing students did not make the grade in the first place. To put them back in the same classes they had previously failed would not correct the problem. In addition it would cause many of these students to feel stupid and not cut out for school. Advocates believe that summer school programs where struggling students are given more attention and an increase in funding for urban districts to diagnose learning problems can help correct these problems.

Together, voluntary national standards, an increase in teacher accountability, and an end to social promotion would go a long way in changing the face of education in this country. But all of these ideas combined would still not affect the way America's children are taught more than would the driving force behind New Democrat education reform: the charter school.

Six years ago Minnesota passed the first charter school law. Since then other states have set up experimental schools modeled after those in Minnesota. The movement rests on the idea that public education should be an education of choices for parents, students, and teachers. In the charter school, educators are freed from many of the restrictions that bind traditional public schools. The school is under contract to a public agency, run by teachers, parents, and other members of the community who are interested in creating a new type of school. In return, these innovators are held accountable for results, most notably in the form of student achievement (Schroeder 1997, 1).

Eventually a move toward charter school districts would be made. Traditional districts would relinquish their role as a provider and would instead be purchasers of educational services by entering into contracts with vendors. Although in the beginning these vendors would most likely be parents and teachers, eventually the group could be expanded to include other organizations — universities, labor unions or even religious organizations. These schools would qualify for public funding if they met certain testing standards and safety requirements. Beyond this the schools would be able to function as they saw fit. There would not be the one prescription for learning that can be found in today's public schools. Institutions that failed to achieve positive results would lose their contracts and their students would enroll in better schools (Sylvester 1997, 80).

One of the best things about charter schools is their ability to educate urban minority children. Many of these institutions were specifically designed for these children, who have long been on the short end of the stick when it comes to education. In 1996, a poll showed that 63 percent of students enrolled in charter schools were minorities, and more than half were poor enough to qualify for the federal lunch program (Sylvester 1997, 89).

There are problems with charter schools. Until now the movement has taken place on a limited state-by-state basis. More studies need to be done before charter districts crop up and the charter school is adopted on a national level. There are those who will always attack charter schools as an idea that undermines education as a "public good." Teachers' unions will most likely oppose any major movement toward charter schools, because under such a system teachers have much more accountability and could be fired more easily. Many charter schools have religious affiliations and this leads some to voice concerns over the separation of church and state.

Proponents argue that by retaining some public control in the form of a contract between the schools and a public agency, the educational system does not become driven by profit as would happen if the schools were privatized. In addition, charter schools would not require a huge increase in funding. While additional funds may be needed, the extra money would go to areas that have been proven to improve education, as opposed to the dumping of funds into areas that do not produce results.

CONCLUSION

In the United States today, public schools are plagued by teacher inefficiency, bloated administrations, and low test scores. These problems are especially bad in urban schools which are in many cases also confronted with the additional problem of school violence. The question is no longer, "Do the public schools need to be fixed?" but is rather, "How do we fix the public schools?" This is something that both sides of the ideological spectrum can agree on.

But the debate gets more intense after that. Should the public schools be privatized? Should a voucher system be introduced? Or is school funding too low and not properly administered? Do teachers' unions have too much power or do teachers need to be paid more so that the best and the brightest are drawn to the profession?

Those at the Democratic Leadership Council believe the best option is a Third Way: a system of charter schools which are publicly accountable but free from the strict regulations that apply to schools today. Critics from both ends of the ideological spectrum believe that the DLC's plan is simply the middle ground. The plan offends teachers' unions — but not as much as privatization would — and conservatives — but not as much as if nothing were done at all. It appeases those middle class citizens who want some school system reform but who are not quite ready to redesign the system completely.

This is not the first time the DLC has been charged with "splitting the difference," or in other words, just taking components from the left and the right and mixing them together into a bland concoction of moderate politics. But as Bill Clinton's presidency has shown, the "Third Way" has had a profound effect on America's political landscape. One needs to look no farther than George W. Bush and Al Gore to see

that the trend toward moderate politics shows no signs of abating.

The DLC argues that in keeping with its Third Way approach, education reform attempts should be based on recent educational data and logical solutions. Members of the DLC believe that their reform proposals are not affected by special interest groups who are only looking out for their own constituency. However America decides to reform education, one can only hope that for the benefit of schoolchildren in years to come, partisans can put aside their differences, not repeat past mistakes, and work together to improve the public schools.

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