

FORUM

Private schools and public lies



George Curry
Guest Columnist

The recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling supporting the use of public dollars for vouchers to private and parochial schools has been a cause for gloating by some conservatives. But their excitement cannot gloss over several important facts that show, when all is said and done, most black students will be no better off by the ruling than they were before.

First, let's deal with the money. The Cleveland vouchers at the center to the court's ruling pay a maximum of \$2,250 a year to fewer than 5,000 families. African Americans should not be duped into thinking that in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling, black students will suddenly be attending classes with wealthy white students and, according to their reasoning, receive a superior education.

That's not going to happen. Let's look at George W. Bush's alma mater, Phillips Academy (also known as Andover) in Massachusetts. It charged boarding students \$26,900 this past

school year. So, if one of those Cleveland students wants to attend Phillips Academy and can manage to transfer a voucher to there, he or she will still need to come up with another \$24,650.

Second, when African Americans leave the public school system for private schools, they enroll in schools that are more racially isolated than many of the public schools from which they have fled. A recent report issued by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University titled "Private School Racial Enrollments and Segregation" concluded, "Black-white segregation is greater among private schools than among public schools."

The report, which is available on the project's Web site, notes that 78 percent of the private-school students in the nation are white. But during the 1997-98 school year, the average black private-school student attended a school that was only 34 percent white.

By comparison, whites make up 64 percent of public-school students. Even with that lower percentage, the average African-American public-school student attends a school with 33 percent white enrollment.

Among private schools, Catholic institutions — where

almost all of the black students go — represent racial segregation at its worst. The Harvard study says, "Black Catholic school students attend schools that are, on average, 31 percent white; black students in non-Catholic religious schools attend schools that average 35 percent white; and black students in secular private schools attend schools that average 41 percent white."

The report does not suggest that the racial segregation among Catholic schools is by design. To the contrary, the authors point out that many of the Catholic schools are still located in central cities where housing discrimination is still a fact of life. Catholic schools enroll about half of all private-school students, followed by evangelical Christian schools with about a third of the pupils and the rest attending secular private schools.

Interestingly, most of the private-school racial segregation in grades K through 12 does not occur in the South, where "white flight" was common during the early days of school desegregation in the 1960s. In fact, white enrollment in private schools in the South is at 11 percent, which is 1 percent lower than the national average. This is at the same time that the South has the highest pro-

portion of black students in public schools with whites.

That does not mean the end of white flight, especially in major cities. The report observes, "In school districts and metropolitan areas with higher shares of black students in the population, a higher proportion of whites attend private schools.... In all of our models, the strongest predictor of white private enrollment is the proportion of black students in the area."

What is often overlooked in the discussion about vouchers in Cleveland is that part of the plan calls for inner-city students enrolling in cooperative suburban school districts. However, no suburban district agreed to take any of the students.

As the debate rages over vouchers and private schools, the reality is that private and parochial schools enroll only 10 percent of all students. That means 90 percent of all students, whether they like it or not, will remain enrolled in public schools. The challenge is how to improve those schools, not find ways to rob public schools of their most motivated students and concerned parents.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com.

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Republicans stumble with outreach, again



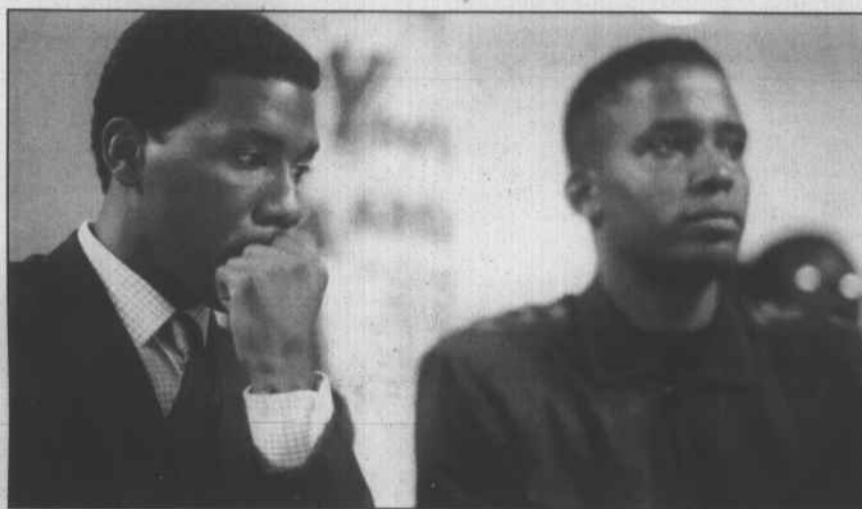
Armstrong Williams
Guest Columnist

The Republican Party's relationship with the black voting populace has been tenuous at best over the last 40 years — a fact that found perfect expression in the 2000 election, when 90 percent of the black voting populace cast their ballots for Democratic challenger Al Gore. Even in Bush's home state of Texas, 95 percent of black voters supported Gore, despite the fact that Bush pursued American blacks with more avidity than any Republican candidate of recent memory.

Plainly, minorities continue to have difficulty trusting Republican candidates — hangover from the party's opposition to retain civil-rights initiatives and affirmative action. As America grows ever more diverse, Republican national leaders realize that unless they actively woo a larger percentage of the African-American and Hispanic vote, they will have difficulty remaining a stable governing party.

President Bush has tried to lay the groundwork for a genuine give-and-take between the GOP and the ethnic community. In practice, however, these outreach efforts continue to be muddled by party leaders who are constrained by their own insular traditions. Exhibit A: the party's recent failure to support Minister Conrad Muhammad of New York.

Some brief background: In his angry youth, Muhammad aligned himself with Rev. Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, where he proceeded to pump his fists at the powers that be. Now, as a calm, articulate 37-year-old, he desperately wants to be a part of the power structure he once denounced. To this end, Muhammad has openly courted the Republican Party leadership to back his bid to represent New



KRT PHOTO BY DAVID TURNLEY/DETROIT FREE PRESS
Conrad Muhammad, 33, (left), and Malik Shabazz, 22, reflect during a news conference in 1998 after the city of New York refused to issue a permit for their Million Youth March.

York's 15th Congressional District in Harlem — an area that Muhammad feels is ripe for change.

As for his past, he says he has shed the vitriol of his youth and now seems prepared to change the dominant power structure by joining it. He cites Congressman Bobby Rush (D-Ill.) as an example. "(Rush) used to say, 'Off the pig,' meaning kill police officers. That was the language of the times, but I'm sure that Congressman Rush does not feel that way today about our police. He is still fighting for his people, but he is doing it through the system. I have made a similar transition."

Dubbed the "hip-hop minister" by the citizens of Harlem for his rousing sermons and community service, Muhammad serves as the executive director of CHHANGE (Conscious Hip-Hop Activism Necessary for Global Empowerment), an organization dedicated to correcting negative stereotypes in the news media and pop culture. If elected, he could use that grass-roots credibility to build bridges between the Republicans and the African-American voting populace.

So why has the Republican

leadership balked at the idea of supporting Muhammad, opting instead to back Independent Party veteran Dr. Jesse Fields?

The official party line is that Muhammad needs to build his résumé and atone for past comments made during his tenure with the Nation of Islam.

"That's absurd," snorted Muhammad, noting that the Republican Party didn't hesitate to seek his support in getting other white, Republican candidates elected. "When I was running around here campaigning for Mike Bloomberg, and I was at the Republican convention during the last presidential race, when I endorsed Gov. (George) Pataki while there was an African-American Democrat in the office, no one said anything about me needing to atone. And while the party said they wouldn't support me as a candidate, they wanted me to go out and get the governor elected and build the party. So I think it is hypocrisy."

And indeed, after conducting some research and polling, the GOP's national leaders concluded that there would likely be hell to pay if they backed a black man with strong views and a personal

history that did not mesh with their own ideals. It is also worth noting that the Republican Party consists largely of those Southern politicians who in the past would have been opposed to civil-rights legislation. Plainly, they have difficulty looking beyond their own tradition.

This is sad because Muhammad supports traditional Republican values of empowering small businesses and injecting market dynamics into the public school system. It is sad because he represents the Republican Party's best chance at supplanting Rep. Charles Rangel.

It is sad because President Bush has made a genuine effort to build bridges to the ethnic community, to increase ethnic diversity within the GOP, and to earn the like and trust of the African-American community. Most of all, it is sad because as America grows ever more diverse, the GOP's national leadership appears ever more insular and stodgy. That means minorities will continue to reflexively vote for Democrats — making them the easiest group for both parties to take for granted.

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