

The Other Milton Friedman

By Cal Thomas

The death last week of Milton Friedman, "the grandmaster of free-market economic theory," as The New York Times accurately labeled him, ended a great life. But there was another Milton Friedman many obituary writers overlooked, or mentioned only in passing, that may offer him an even greater legacy than his economic theories about limited government.

In the last 10 years of his 94-year life, Friedman and his wife, Rose, dedicated themselves to school choice. They viewed school choice as a companion to economic freedom. Through the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation they enthusiastically promoted school choice as a means of liberating the poor from failing government schools. Failing schools produced failing students, they reasoned, depriving children of the tools they would need to attain economic independence. Friedman first proposed school vouchers in 1955, but it wasn't until 1996 that he and Rose started their foundation to take advantage of the growing interest in school choice.

Friedman did not fit the stereotype of an economic conservative. He was genuinely interested in helping the poor by giving them a choice of schools that would offer them the best opportunity to escape poverty's cycle. He noted a 1999 National Opinion Poll conducted for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in which 60 percent of minorities support vouchers and a whopping 87 percent of African-American parents ages 26 to 35 and 66.4 percent of blacks ages 18 to 25 favor them.

The main opponents of school choice are the teachers' unions and white liberal politicians who receive their campaign contributions. They mostly send their children and grandchildren to private schools, while condemning minority children to poorly-performing government schools. How's that for "compassion" and a commitment to helping the poor? The poor are helped to escape poverty when they get a good education. Failure to give them what has been called "the last civil right" practically ensures they will remain poor.

The Friedman Foundation's Web site answers virtually every objection to school choice. First, it really is a choice. Universal vouchers would allow all parents to direct funds set aside by the government for education to the school they believe will best serve their child, whether the school is public or private, religious or secular. This separates the

government operation of schools from the government financing of them.

Only those who could demonstrate economic need would be eligible for the vouchers, except for parents whose children attend public schools identified as failing. In such circumstances, all parents would be offered vouchers.

Won't school choice hurt public schools by depriving them of needed funds? No, says Friedman. "Public schools pay attention when school choice is on the table." He cites Florida as an example, noting that after a school choice program began, "schools identified as failing are already publicizing their efforts to improve by hiring more teachers, increasing funds for after-school tutoring and lowering class sizes. One superintendent, Earl Lennard, even vowed to take a 5 percent pay cut if his county's schools received a failing grade." In other words, competition works in free markets and in school choice.

In Florida, Cleveland and Milwaukee, public schools have received more aid from the state and federal government for their public schools since voucher programs were implemented.

School choice works for the benefit of students, who ought to be the focus of education. Research shows that prior to receiving a voucher, the majority of participating students score well below the national average on standardized tests. Statisticians and educational researchers from Harvard and the University of Houston conducted a re-analysis of the raw data compiled in an earlier study of the Milwaukee school choice program. They found that choice students benefit academically from the program, showing significant gains in both reading and mathematics by their fourth year of participation. And, according to John F. Witte, Troy D. Sterr and Christopher A. Thorn, who conducted the initial Milwaukee study, "the parents of 'choice' kids are virtually unanimous in their opinion of the program: they love it. Parents are not only far more satisfied with their freely chosen private schools than they were with their former public schools; they participate more actively in their children's education now that they've made the move."

If school choice becomes the norm in America, it will be Milton Friedman's real legacy and every poor child who is liberated from a failed government school will owe him a lasting debt of gratitude.

*(Mr. Thomas is America's most widely syndicated op-ed columnist and co-author of **Blinded by Might**. Copyright 2006, Tribune Media Services. Used with permission)*