

ROBERT HOLLAND

The new massive resisters

It wasn't one of the South's proudest moments. By the late 1950s, the movement to end officially enforced racial segregation in public education had gathered moral force. Most Americans realized that educational freedom was inevitable and just. However, Southern politicians mounted an ugly resistance that was doomed to fail.

History repeats itself. In 1999 the movement to enable all American families to send their children to the schools of their choice is on an unmistakable roll. Majorities of all groups, blacks most of all, recognize the rightness of this cause. Yet there are bitter-end resisters who are trying to block the schoolhouse door as pitifully as did Alabama's George Wallace. Consider two recent examples:

(1) With back-to-school season at hand, a coalition led by the National Education Association, the nation's largest teacher union, filed for an injunction to block 4,000 low-income Cleveland children from using vouchers to attend private schools. Never mind that families have made their back-to-school plans, and that some of them have been productively using their vouchers for three years. The NEA thought it saw a judicial opening — Ohio's re-enactment of the voucher law to correct a technical defect — that it might exploit to force these children back into public schools. The objective: to protect its monopoly of labor.

(2) The NEA, along with its trusty lapdog, the national PTA, is among the plaintiffs in Florida seeking to strangle in the crib Gov. Jeb Bush's A-Plus reform, which features

vouchers for students who wish to escape public schools that have consistently flunked basic tests. (They may choose a private or parochial school, or another public school.) Never mind that fewer than 140 Pensacola students will receive "opportunity scholarships" the first go-round. Never mind that Mr. Bush's bold plan gives the education establishment the power to kill the vouchers they so detest — by simply teaching children to read so there are no failing schools. The NEA would rather squelch competition than do right by children.

There are veterans of the civil-rights movement who see school choice as part of a historical continuum. Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young has likened those who refuse to accept consignment to ghetto schools to Rosa Parks' refusing to sit at the back of the bus. When an amazing 1.25 million low-income families (upward of a third of all those eligible in several major cities) applied for the first round of scholarships created by philanthropists Ted Forstmann and John T. Walton, Mr. Young said those who had applied for educational emancipation will go down in history "not as victims" but as "heroes with

whom a great awakening was born."

Like the South's hidebound resisters of the '50s, who were blind to the moral issue and missed opportunities for in-house reform, the NEA has snubbed even the main choice initiative within the public-school system: charter schools. Although such schools receive exemption from bureaucratic and collective-bargaining rules so they may innovate, they remain accountable to public authorities. The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991; now there are 1,200 such schools serving 300,000 students in 36 states.

Yet when First Lady Hillary Clinton endorsed charter schools at this summer's NEA convention in Orlando, Fla., delegates who had been wildly cheering her every assertion fell deathly silent. The NEA grand strategy is to try to snuff the charter spirit of liberty.

In California, the NEA hacks unsuccessfully pushed for legislation intended to compel all charter-school teachers to join the union. In North Carolina, they tried to get state authorities to shut down charter schools that flunk a "diversity test," even though the reason some schools are predominantly black is that black families have fled public schools that were not meeting their children's needs.

The NEA of 1999 has a lot in common with the Bull Connors of the 1950s. And standing against the tide of freedom, it no doubt will be every bit as effective.

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