

Peter Flanigan's Choice

A philanthropic pioneer of education reform.

The Wall Street Journal: Review & Outlook

August 2, 2013

An important pioneer and giant of the school-choice movement died earlier this week. Peter Flanigan, an investment banker and influential aide to President Nixon, was 90. Through the bright autumn of his years, Flanigan turned to education philanthropy. His unstinting focus was on giving poor kids better school options. He sat on the board of the Alliance for School Choice and founded Student Sponsor Partners, a privately funded school-voucher program.

"Living the Call," a 2011 book on the role of laypersons in the Catholic church, describes Flanigan as "one of the great patrons of Catholic education for inner-city children in New York." In an interview with the authors, Michael Novak and William E. Simon Jr., Flanigan said that one reason he thought these kids might be better off in religious schools was the absence of teachers unions, which "are destroying the public school system."

He also viewed access to a decent education as a civil right. "You and I know very few people whose parents didn't, one way or another, get their kids into a good school of their choice. But we deny that right [to inner-city kids]."

Peter Flanigan used his political skills and personal fortune to put in motion a small movement that has since grown into an army of benefactors working across the U.S. to give the country's poorest kids an educational break. In time, he was joined by the likes of Ted Forstmann and John Walton, who put their fortunes behind the Children's Scholarship Fund. Among hedge-fund operators, the goal of better alternative inner-city schools has become virtually an industry-wide cause.

It's working. A study released in April by Matthew Chingos of the Brookings Institution and Paul E. Peterson of Harvard found that school vouchers boost college enrollment for blacks by 24%. When he was honored for his efforts in 2004 by the Manhattan Institute, Peter Flanigan said that his goal for the children attending the many schools he funded was "educational freedom." Promise fulfilled.

A version of this article appeared August 3, 2013, on page A12 in the U.S. edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, with the headline: Peter Flanigan's Choice.

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved