

Why Oklahomans from A to Z Should Embrace School Choice



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Edited by Brandon Dutcher

Introduction

Ever since the U. S. Supreme Court ruled last summer in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* on the constitutionality of school vouchers, the school choice movement has continued to gain momentum. As Sol Stern wrote of the case: “How big a victory *Zelman* was for the school choice movement became clear the next day, when the *Washington Post*, a pillar of the liberal establishment, editorialized in favor of vouchers. ... The *Post*’s endorsement of vouchers signaled that, after *Zelman*, the foundations of the public education monopoly had started to crack. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, it wasn’t the end of the war over school choice, or even the beginning of the end, but it did seem to mark the end of the beginning.”

It’s safe to say we’ve marked the end of the beginning in Oklahoma as well. School choice – which can be defined as **any education policy which removes the government-erected barriers to families’ freedom and ability to choose for their children the safest and best schools, whether those schools are public or private** – continues to gain ground in the Sooner State. Indeed, with charter schools, enterprise schools, interdistrict choice, magnet and specialty schools, home schooling, online education, privately funded K-12 scholarships, parental choice in the No Child Left Behind Act, and more, it’s no wonder state Superintendent Sandy Garrett can say, “We have a lot of choice already in Oklahoma. School choice is a reality, and we should just get used to it.”

We’ve reached the end of the beginning, but still much work remains to be done. For example, Oklahoma has not yet approved vouchers, scholarship tax credits, or tuition tax credits, although Superintendent Garrett has said she thinks eventually “we’ll have some sort of a tax credit or something to let children go wherever their parents want.” We at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs agree, and we hope this publication will be a helpful tool in the continuing struggle for educational freedom.



African-American

children are being left behind.

Their parents need more choices.

By Linda Shrewsbury

African-Americans face an education crisis. The present system of public schools has failed us. According to the latest data from the nation's report card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 3 percent – 3 percent! – of Oklahoma's black 4th graders are proficient in math, demonstrating "solid academic performance." Black achievement in reading is also shocking. Only 9 percent of Oklahoma's black 4th graders show acceptable competency in reading, according to NAEP.

Researcher Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute has reported that nationwide, only 56 percent of eligible African-Americans graduated from high school in 1998, compared to white students' rate of 78 percent. Of the country's 50 largest school districts, 15 failed to graduate even 50 percent of black students. In the worst big district in the country, only 29 percent of the city's black students graduate. NAEP data confirm a continuing achievement gap between white students and African-Americans that is as large as or larger than a decade ago.

Massive failure for African-American children and lack of adequate preparation will lead to fewer job opportunities and lower earnings in the future.

To avoid this outcome, our children need help now and stand to benefit most from the expansion of educational choice such as vouchers and charter schools. Parents must have the right to vote with their feet and take their children out of schools that fail them, or millions of children will be left behind.

A June 2001 poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank that focuses on black issues, found that 57 percent of African-Americans support school vouchers, one form of school choice. For blacks younger than 35, the support jumped to 75 percent. In a multiyear evaluation of private voucher programs in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Dayton, Ohio, researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that African-American students who were given the choice to



attend private schools scored significantly higher on standardized tests than comparable students remaining in public schools. These test score gains happened at religious and private schools that had little more than half the available funds of their public school counterparts. Parents reported much higher levels of satisfaction and overwhelming support for continuing the programs.

Parental choice is not a new concept.

Parents with financial resources have always had the power to locate in the best public school districts or to enroll their children in private schools. School choice has only become controversial as low-income, mostly African-American, parents have also sought ways to obtain educational alternatives other than their assigned public schools. Opponents of legislation for tax-supported school choice would essentially deny some parents the basic right to decide which schools their

children attend, although this right is already being exercised daily by many other Americans.

Some say tax-supported school choice is a bad idea because private schools lack accountability. But the question is: accountability to *whom*? Should the school be accountable to bureaucrats or to parents? Parents who have the power to vote with their feet exert far more influence on educational quality than bureaucratic regulations do. This accountability to parents is precisely the missing factor in public education, and it is condescending to dismiss its significance when it comes to low-income African-American parents. Accountability to parents is indispensable for helping children gain an effective education.

Few groups exercise school choice more than politicians and public school teachers. A 2000 survey by the Heritage Foundation found that 40 percent of U.S. representatives and 49 percent of U.S. senators with school-age children sent them to private school. A similar poll in 2001 showed those numbers had increased to 47 percent and 51 percent, respectively. Surveys at the state level reveal similar results and trends among local elected officials. While exercising school choice for their children, year after year these lawmakers oppose legislation that would give the same power to other parents, including African-Americans.

Meanwhile, the school employee labor unions, both nationally and in Oklahoma, have stated agendas of opposing school choice and are fighting in every state to preserve the status quo. They want to control the education monopoly that benefits them while it destroys the future for millions of students.

We cannot leave our children's future in the hands of self-serving or even well-meaning education bureaucrats. Nothing more clearly serves the interest of children than giving school choice to parents. Parents know what is best for their own children. The education crisis facing African-Americans can only be solved by parents insisting on the right to choose the best education options for our children. 🍌

Linda Shrewsbury, a school choice activist in Tulsa, home schooled her three children through the elementary grades. Later, they attended private middle school and public high school.



Businessmen

(of all people) should realize that competition and consumer choice will benefit the customer.

By John Walton

[The following is excerpted from Mr. Walton's remarks at OCPA's 2002 Citizenship Award Dinner.]

I thought I'd share with you how we got started with school reform, which I refer to as sort of the body of things that we are doing in our [Walton Family] Foundation. It really began many years ago when my father, who's been gone now for about 10 years, was alive and started our family foundation. We all used to gather around as a family and talk about the different things we were going to do. It was pretty obvious after a fairly cursory look around the country that education was the largest challenge that we faced as a society.

There is arguably no part of our country, and no part of our society, that isn't affected by the opportunities that are available in education. You can talk about crime, you can talk about the economy, you can talk about the quality of elected officials, you can talk about any aspect of our country that you wish – everything is probably more directly impacted by education than any other single issue.

So, it wasn't hard to decide where to focus, but the question was exactly *what do you do*? Well, we started with some college scholarships and that worked great. We're still doing those today, and they still do an amazing job of providing opportunity to kids that really deserve it. We began to look at the overall education equation, and of course you don't have to do that long before you realize that the real problems are in K-12 education. As you look at K-12 education, you find that you're dealing with a \$700-plus billion a year industry. I don't care whose money you're talking about, by additive and incremental spending you are not going to move that environment.

We thought, well, you know there are still great

opportunities in public education and among our public schools. We sought those out at that time, and we still do today. We still support those things that we find that are really innovative and really trying to make a difference. We thought there has got to be more.

Obviously, when you look around at everything else that works in our society, it doesn't take long to distinguish the difference between what we have in public education and what we have around the rest of the country. In virtually no other area of our society is the consumer of the product totally powerless with regard to their participation in the process. You don't have to buy at a certain place. And it's the only place in our society that we spend about the same amount on everybody. But only those with enough financial wherewithal of their own, who are willing to forgo what the system is providing, have the power of making the choice of what's best for their child.

That was kind of radical thinking, so we didn't just jump into this business. We first began to look, and I was supported by my family 100 percent in this effort.

We began very cautiously to look at some of the things that were being done. About that time, 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published, we had a lot of programs that were introduced in the next five to seven years and a lot of commotion; but by the early '90s, people were beginning to say, "You know, it's the kids. There's just a certain segment of the population that we are not going to be able to do a whole lot with. We've tried everything." Think back 10 years. It wasn't long ago when it started to become

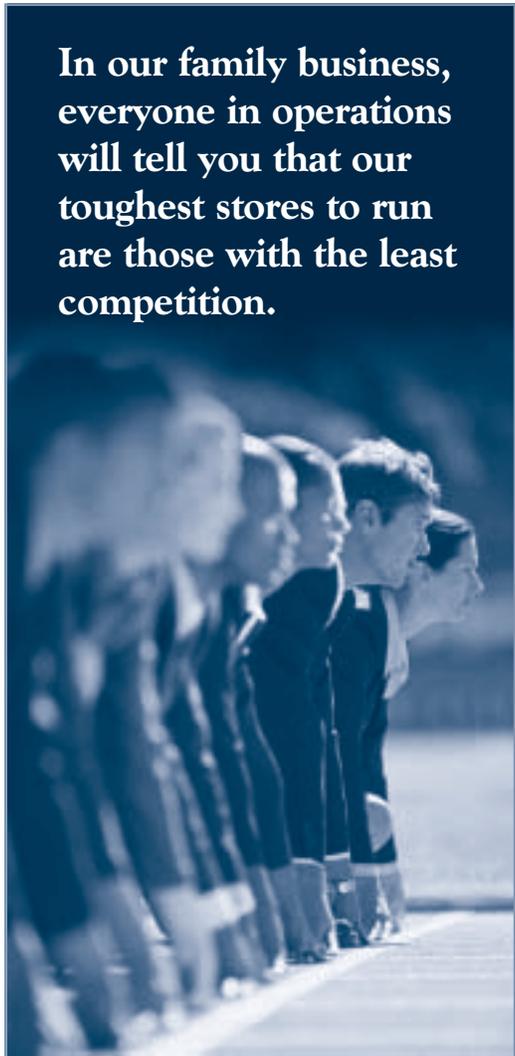
more and more popular to blame the children, because we had done a lot of things. It wasn't working. ...

With the advent of [school choice] programs, and the successes that began to grow out of them, and the programs that followed them, you began to hear less and less of "it's the kids." We began to once again focus on "what can we do to improve this system?" Today, you hear that the kids are a challenge, but you don't hear anyone say it's impossible. I think that if you look back over the last 10 years, the effort to provide this power to choose to parents has brought us at least that far. ...

I think our public schools are very capable of serving their customers well, but you know, it's like in our family business – everyone in operations will tell you that our toughest stores to run are those with the least competition. They say that not as a platitude of some kind; it is realistic because it's hard to maintain the focus, it's hard to maintain the level of commitment and the waking up every day thinking, "How can I improve this?" I don't think you have to teach public schools a whole lot about how to serve the customer. I think we just need to create

the kind of environment in which the customer is empowered, and then everybody will serve the customer. 🍌

John Walton is a director of Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., and an investor in privately held companies introducing new industrial technologies in the solar, composites and office-products fields. He also serves on several nonprofit boards including the Walton Family Foundation, with a focus on K-12 education improvement.



In our family business, everyone in operations will tell you that our toughest stores to run are those with the least competition.



Catholics

have a fundamental right to choose a school that corresponds to their own convictions.

By Patrick B. McGuigan

Defending the right of parents to guide the religious and moral formation of children, Pope John Paul II has issued a vigorous new appeal for laws and policies supporting school choice, saying that parents must have “concrete” means to offer children a Catholic education.

Leading Roman Catholics have long advocated full-scale parental choice, supporting policies to empower parents to seek the best schools for their children. Former Gov. Frank Keating supported the idea but never pushed beyond reforms expanding choice within public schools.

John Paul’s latest appeal came January 19, 2003, when he addressed a “Catholic School Day” event in Rome. He spoke to several thousand teachers and pupils who had gathered in St. Peter’s Square to pray the Angelus (a Catholic prayer). He said he hopes “that every family will have the concrete possibility to choose this type of school for its children.”

The comments built on the pontiff’s past reflections. On November 29, 2002, John Paul asked leaders of Italian regions and autonomous provinces to pay closer attention to families and education policy. He asked the regional presidents and other executives “to guarantee the freedom of educational choice for families.”

John Paul’s comments coincide with teachings in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, newly revised during his papacy. He has spoken of the need for parents to “evangelize their children” and lauds the Catechism’s view that “parents have the

first responsibility for the education of their children.”

The Catechism teaches that “the right and duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable” and affirms that parents should “educate their children to fulfill God’s law.” This yields the conclusion that “parents have the right to choose a school ... which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible, parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring concrete conditions for its exercise.”

Catholic teachings on parental choice blend into beliefs about the participation of Christians in public life. Catholics have a right to assure that schools reflect their values. In November 2002, in a doctrinal note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger commented for the Vatican:

“By fulfilling their civic duties, ‘guided by a Christian conscience,’ in conformity with its values, the lay faithful exercise their proper task of infusing the temporal order with Christian values. ...” The Second Vatican Council taught, as the note recalls, that “the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in public life, that is, in the many different

economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good.” This participation includes “promotion and defense of goods such as public order and peace, freedom and equality, respect for human life and for the environment, justice and solidarity.”

This teaching takes on special significance as the broader culture denigrates or undermines respect for moral norms: “A kind of cultural relativism exists today, evident in the conceptualization and defense of an ethical pluralism, which sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principles of the natural moral law.”



This current situation is not congruent with Catholic teaching: “(T)he value of tolerance is disingenuously invoked when a large number of citizens ... are asked not to base their contribution to society and political life ... on their particular understanding of the human person and the common good. The history of the twentieth century demonstrates that those citizens were right who recognized the falsehood of relativism, and with it, the notion that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good and the state.”

The doctrinal note continued: “If Christians must ‘recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view about the organization of worldly affairs,’ they are also called to reject, as injurious to democratic life, a conception of pluralism that reflects moral relativism.”

Clearly, Catholics in particular should consider anew church teachings in this time of opportunity for parental choice. The U.S. Supreme Court has rebuffed anti-choice arguments that had attacked practical mechanisms for parental empowerment. Successful experiments in choice are under way in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida and other places.

The cultural and moral relativism Cardinal Ratzinger deplored in this doctrinal note are increasingly prevalent in government-run schools. This makes the case for parents to have not only the right but also the ability to exercise true choice in education, so that they can fulfill the duties God has placed upon them as those most responsible for the ethical and moral formation of children.

Catholic advocacy for parental choice in education is a direct result of healthy Catholic, and American, traditions advancing God’s Kingdom in the secular realm – in the world, the United States, and here at home in Oklahoma. 🇺🇸

Pat McGuigan is an independent writer, consultant, public speaker and educator based in Oklahoma City. A state-certified teacher with an M.A. in history, he is the author of hundreds of essays, commentaries and news articles on public and private schools in Oklahoma and the United States. His articles have appeared in many Catholic publications.



Democrats should stop clinging to a public school system which harms poor and minority children – in violation of the very principles our party stands for.

By Charles Wheelan

Allow me to propose a thought experiment for my fellow Democrats. Imagine a prominent Republican legislator puffing himself up in the well of the state House or state Senate and announcing a new Republican education proposal. The major details of this education proposal are the following: Two parallel school systems will be set up in Oklahoma. One will be for poor, predominantly minority students in disadvantaged areas. These schools, housed in crumbling buildings, will offer a low-quality curriculum, stultifying bureaucracy, and few extracurricular activities.

Meanwhile, this Republican plan will create a parallel system of private and suburban schools for affluent students. Wealthy families will choose among these schools, some of which would be among the best in the world, by enrolling in a private school or by moving to the suburb with the public school that they favor most.

Poor students in Oklahoma would not have such a choice; they must attend one of the schools in their neighborhood, where they will be segregated with other disadvantaged students. In fact, on this issue, the Republican plan would draw a line in the sand. Imagine this Republican legislator pounding the podium, declaring, “Under no circumstances will public money be used to allow poor students to attend any school but the one to which they have been assigned!”

How would Oklahoma Democrats react to such a plan? I hope they would rightfully blast it as unfair, racist, inefficient, and detrimental to the long-term economic health of the state. Why is it, then, that Democrats, in Oklahoma and every other state, are so wedded to the education status quo, which is really nothing more than the hypothetical

Republican plan that I have described above?

We Democrats are on the wrong side of the school choice issue. The political explanation is pathetically simple. The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teachers union, is consistently one of the top soft-money contributors to the Democratic Party. In Oklahoma City, where education policy is more likely to be shaped, the teachers unions are always a potent force. The NEA opposes school choice with every fiber of its existence; vouchers are political suicide for aspiring Democrats.

What is more disturbing (and less easily explained) is that Democratic opinion leaders, who are less constrained by the politics of school choice, still offer such sloppy thinking on the issue. Our party's intellectual leaders have compiled a list of superficial assaults on school choice that are far from the heart of the debate:

- Vouchers will destroy Oklahoma's public schools. This statement makes a great sound bite, even if it is probably a better argument in favor of school choice. The supposed logic is that thousands of students will stream out of the state's public schools if given the opportunity, leaving a shell of a system behind. There are two problems with this logic: (1) If students – especially the “best” students – will flock from public schools like rats from a sinking ship, then what makes this system so worth protecting? And (2) From a social justice standpoint, the essence of “public” education is that the government provides an opportunity for all students to attend a decent school, not that all students must attend a publicly operated school. Do we argue that the spirit of Medicare has been compromised because the system uses private hospitals and doctors?
- Vouchers will benefit wealthy Oklahoma families who already send their children to private schools. So what? Our party is at its absolute ugliest when we assume that punishing the rich and the middle class is the same as helping the poor. Is there some logical reason that a family paying \$60,000 or \$80,000 in taxes should not have the right to a subsidized education at a school they deem excellent? More important, vouchers will bolster our urban tax bases by stemming the flight of middle-class parents who

leave our cities because they do not trust urban public schools and cannot afford private ones. Vouchers are pro-city, which is something that we Democrats are supposed to care about.

- Some Oklahoma parents won't exercise their right to choose, or will make a bad choice. Perhaps, but there is ample evidence (Milwaukee, Cleveland) that low-income parents will make a great effort to take advantage of voucher programs. Besides, when did it become morally acceptable to punish some parents and children for the bad decisions that other parents might make? If a ship with thousands of passengers were sinking, would we keep the life jackets stowed away because some passengers might put them on improperly? And when did the Democratic Party become so patronizing towards the poor?
- School choice must be a bad idea if the Republicans are so excited about it. Ignore the stupidity of this logic for a moment and recall some recent history. The Republicans were the party of civil rights in the 1950s (with the strongest opposition coming from Southern Democrats). We took the issue away from them and have done quite well with it.

There are good reasons to move deliberately on school choice in Oklahoma. Most important, the data on how effective vouchers would be as a tool for improving student achievement are far from conclusive. Several small programs offer reasons to be optimistic, but it is wrong to assert that we know school choice will make students radically better off, even if we have strong theoretical reasons to believe that it might.

Second, the devil is in the details with voucher plans. How will schools select students? Will parents be able to add money on to the value of their voucher? What schools will be able to accept public dollars? How will students with special needs be integrated into the system? These are the kinds of issues that we need to be discussing, rather than clinging defensively to a system that, if it were presented to us fresh today, we would blast for what it is: an assault on the poor, a waste of resources, and a disgrace to the principles that the Democratic Party stands for. 🍌

Charles Wheelan, a former correspondent for *The Economist*, is the author of *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science* (Norton, 2002).



Evangelicals

should choose for their children a Christian education, not an agnostic one.

By Brandon Dutcher

There continues to be much discussion in Oklahoma about a government-run “education lottery.” I am troubled by such an arrangement because it exploits the poor and empowers a state monopoly that some Oklahomans find immoral. (The “lottery” aspect is objectionable too, but that’s a subject for another day.)

Let’s take a closer look at this current system of government-run education. In this essay I am not attempting to persuade people of other faiths or of no faith; I am speaking to my fellow evangelical Christians, asking you to embrace school choice. As is the case with the other writers in this publication, the views expressed are my own, not necessarily those of OCPA.

Introduction

“I could take you back to the very place where I lost my faith in God. I was 14 years old.”

So writes Lee Strobel in the student edition of his book *The Case for Christ*. He goes on:

“At Prospect High School in Mount Prospect, Illinois, the biology classroom was on the third floor in the northwest corner of the building. I was sitting in the second row from the windows, third chair from the front, when I first learned about Darwin’s theory of evolution.

“This was revolutionary to me! Our teacher explained that life originated millions of years ago when chemicals randomly reacted with each other

in a warm ocean on the primordial earth. Then, through a process of survival of the fittest and natural selection, life forms gained in complexity. Eventually, human beings emerged from the same family tree as apes.

“Although the teacher didn’t address this aspect of evolution, its biggest implication was obvious to me: If evolution explains the origin and development of life, then God was out of a job! What did we need God for? ...

“To my mind, this was great news! Finally, here was a rational basis for atheism. If evolution explains life, then the first chapters of the Bible must be mythology or wishful thinking. And if that were true of the first chapters, why not the rest? Jesus could not have been God. Miracles aren’t possible; they’re just the attempts by pre-scientific

people to make sense out of what they couldn’t understand but which now science can explain.

“For the first time, I had a rational reason to abandon Christianity.”

Strobel spent many years as an agnostic. He went on to college and to Yale law school, and then became an award-winning journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*. Later, after an exhaustive investigation of the claims of Christ, he became a Christian. But



it is tragic to think of the millions of children whose stories don’t have a happy ending.

Tragic, but not surprising. After all, if Genesis is mythology, then there is no original sin, and thus no need for a savior. If you can do away with the first man Adam, who needs the last Adam? (For the record, the Darwinian story directly contradicts the words of Christ, who affirmed the historicity of the Genesis account, and with good reason: He was there. See, for example, Mark 10:6, John 1:3, Col.1:16, Heb. 1:2.)

But this discussion of origins is merely an introductory example, a point of departure. The

real question is: How should Christians educate their children? The answer shouldn't turn solely on origins, or sex education, or whole language, or fuzzy math, or the homosexual agenda in the classroom, or history textbooks that are more critical of Christianity than of Islam. These are all symptoms. Let's go right to the heart of the matter. As a follower of Christ, are you required to give your children – His children – a Christian education? Indeed, what is the purpose of education?

A common refrain goes something like this: "I want my children to get a solid education so they can get a good job, have a high standard of living, and become good, productive citizens." That is all well and good. But listen to John Milton, who understood that this world was not his home: "The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him."

Now you may say, "That sounds kind of, well, *religious*. We can take care of that on Sundays." But I would respectfully suggest that that kind of compartmentalization is not possible. Yes, Sunday school is religious, but so is Monday-Friday school.

Education Is Inescapably Religious

Education – because it deals with ultimate reality, with ideas and values of ultimate importance – is necessarily religious. Any education worthy of the name will address some of life's basic questions: Who am I, and how did I get here? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of history, and what is my part in it? Is there a God, and what does He expect of me? Teachers who pretend the crucial questions can be avoided for 12 years, or can be answered in some "neutral" or "value-free" way, are stunningly deceived.

Now you may say, "Can't we just teach the kids math and history and science – the neutral stuff – and not worry about religious ideas? After all, facts are facts." Well, not exactly.

Everyone has a *worldview*, what Ronald Nash calls "a set of beliefs about the most important issues in life ... a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality." And as authors Herbert Schlossberg and Marvin Olasky point out, a person's

worldview matters: "The conclusions people reach are directly dependent on the assumptions with which they begin. Scholars start with a view of the universe, a philosophy of life, or a theology for existence – whether or not they call it that – and superimpose that view on documents, interviews, survey results, printouts, and other sources."

For example: "When astronomer Carl Sagan says there is only the cosmos and nothing beyond that, we need to ask him how he learned that. We'll find that he didn't discover it by peering through a telescope, but by certain assumptions or presuppositions that he brought *to* his telescope."

Many "facts" are not neutral at all; they come with certain presuppositional baggage. Fourteen-year-old Lee Strobel was learning plenty of "facts" in that third-floor classroom – facts about science, history, anthropology, and more – but they were filtered through the worldview of a particular teacher and textbook author.

There is nothing neutral about what children learn in school. This is obvious enough when the subject is sex education or biology, but it is even true in a subject as "neutral" as, say, mathematics. You may think that everyone, regardless of his religious worldview, can agree that $1 + 1 = 2$. But that's not the case. As educator Jim Nance points out, "one plus one equals two only if the numbers one and two reflect something about reality. This has been challenged or denied outright by many philosophers throughout history." A recent feature in the *New York Times Magazine* highlighted Marcia Ascher's book *Ethnomathematics: A Multicultural View of Mathematical Ideas*. Ascher says that "much of mathematics education depends upon assumptions of Western culture and carries with it Western values." She asks: "Is a square something that has external reality or is it something only in our minds?"

Schlossberg and Olasky write: "The problem, as [C. S.] Lewis knew, is that children in schools, and all of the rest of us as well, are bombarded with religious propaganda masquerading as general information, or even technical detail in subjects such as grammar or psychology. The information environment makes certain ideas seem plausible and other ideas seem implausible, without any arguments being made for or against them."

One cannot separate “religious” information from general “academic” information, as if the God of the universe could be placed into a tidy little compartment. Christ will not be marginalized. He is holding the universe together, and in Him are hid *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is the central reality, the very I AM. He cannot be finessed. “Every line of true knowledge must find its completeness in its convergency to God, even as every beam of daylight leads the eye to the sun,” wrote the great 19th-century Presbyterian theologian R. L. Dabney. “If religion be excluded from our study, every process of thought will be arrested before it reaches its proper goal.”

Or as Guthrie native Bob Slosser, an evangelical author and former *New York Times* editor, put it: “How can children be expected to make sense of anything – from science to social studies – if the puzzle always has the central piece missing?”

Somebody’s religious assumptions – somebody’s worldview – will necessarily undergird and suffuse any curriculum. Is the student created in God’s image, or is he a meaningless collection of chemicals, the product of a blind, undirected, purposeless process? Is God the architect of history, or not? Does the government rest upon His shoulder, or not? And on it goes. From anthropology to zoology, education is intrinsically, inescapably religious. As *World* magazine’s Joel Belz, a former Christian school principal, put it, both churches and schools “are so profoundly involved with shaping the minds, the hearts, and the souls of their people that it should be all but impossible for someone to draw a line saying where ‘education’ leaves off and where ‘religion’ picks up.”

Even the idea that education should be preparation for “getting a good job” is a religious notion. After all, “vocation” comes from the Latin word

voco, meaning “I call.” Who is doing the calling, and what is He calling you to?

Alfred North Whitehead said, “The essence of education is that it be religious.” The question we need to ask ourselves is, which religion?

Christianity or Agnosticism?

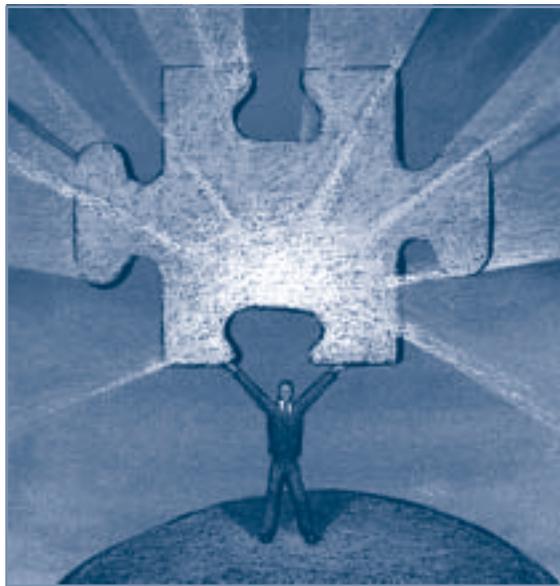
In the 17th century, Harvard students were to understand their education thusly: “The main end of [a student’s] life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, John 17.3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.”

Christianity isn’t some Sunday diversion; it’s an all-encompassing, 24/7 worldview. St. Paul instructs fathers to bring up their children in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Author and school founder Douglas Wilson says this requirement to provide our children with a *paideia* of the Lord “is actually one of the most far-reaching commands of the New Testament.”

In the ancient world,

Wilson writes, “the *paideia* was all-encompassing and involved nothing less than the enculturation of the future citizen. The *paideia* extends well past the simple limits of an established curriculum; it describes an entire way of life. In short, the ancients understood that education was religious and that religious claims are total.”

“Even though there is no explicit biblical injunction to place children in Christian or home schools,” Olasky points out, “the emphasis on providing a godly education under parental supervision is clear.” As *Christianity Today* editorialized August 5, 2002, “Most parents instinctually understand that they (not the State) are responsible for training their children (Prov. 22:6; Deut. 6:4-9). They also understand that education has to be founded on a coherent worldview. To have students learning relativistic secularism in the



classroom makes it that much more difficult to impart transcendent values at home, and it teaches children to compartmentalize, rather than integrate, their knowledge (as if one set of intellectual rules apply at school and another at home)."

Now why does all of this point to the need for school choice? Well, as you may have inferred by now, this kind of Christ-centered education is simply not possible in the government-run school system. (Nor should it be. Golden Rule-minded Christians shouldn't use the coercive power of the state to foist our beliefs on others.)

In a recent letter to the editor of *The Daily Oklahoman*, retired Oklahoma educator Jean Stackhouse lamented,

"We had to give up discipline and God in schools." That's true. But that doesn't mean the public schools are devoid of religious messages. Far from it. As *Humanist Manifesto* signer John Dewey understood, public education is religious – and whether you call

the prevailing philosophy humanism, or secularism, or agnosticism, the public schools are soaked through with it. Their religious message is clear: God may or may not exist, but he or she is simply not relevant to what goes on in school.

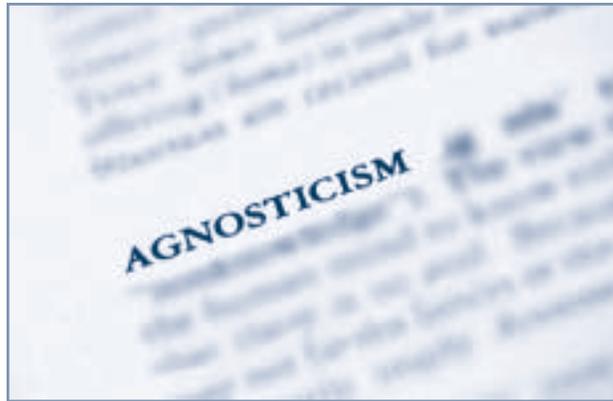
This, I would suggest, is an outrage. "The school system that ignores God," writes Gordon H. Clark, "teaches its pupils to ignore God; and this is not neutrality. It is the worst form of antagonism, for it judges God to be unimportant and irrelevant in human affairs. This is atheism."

In *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained*, Stephen C. Perks writes: "An education that denies God and His Word as the interpretive principle of all things, including all academic disciplines, is an education that implicitly denies the whole of biblical truth and the validity of the Christian faith. To subject our children to such an education is to deny the sovereignty and Lordship of God over our children ..."

There's no getting around it. Every school –

public, private, or home – will either acknowledge Christ or, like Peter, deny Him.

The great Catholic essayist Joseph Sobran has observed that "by omission and implication, the public schools teach that religion is unnecessary. And if it is unnecessary, it is superfluous. And if it is superfluous, it can be a harmless private interest at best and, at worst, an obstacle to progress and tolerance. These are precisely the attitudes many people emerge with after spending their entire youth in public schools." After all, as Christ taught us, "a student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).



Please don't misunderstand. I want to emphasize – and emphasize strongly – that there are hundreds if not thousands of faithful Christian teachers in Oklahoma's public schools. I know many of them personally. These men and women have a heart for children, and their investment in

young lives is making a difference. But despite their best efforts, the hard truth remains that the schools are ... officially agnostic. They're agnostic as a matter of law and public policy. This isn't a criticism; it's simply a description.

State representative Kevin Calvey (R-Del City), a Georgetown-educated attorney, put it well: "The 'religious neutrality' enforced in our public schools is not really neutral. The lack of religion is in itself a religious viewpoint, namely agnosticism." This court-ordered agnosticism "is not the fault of teachers or even school administrators," Calvey says. "It is the fault of the U.S. Supreme Court and the ACLU. But regardless of who is at fault, it is time for the discrimination to stop." (Unsurprisingly, Rep. Calvey is one of the leading school-choice advocates in Oklahoma.)

Christian parents need to ask themselves: Should we provide for our children a Christian education, or an agnostic education? Should we render our children unto God, or unto Caesar?

In his book *Standing on the Promises*, Douglas Wilson argues that “genuine Christian education is not optional. It is a biblical mandate.” The Bible expressly requires a non-agnostic form of education. “What area of life has God declared to be neutral, in which it is permissible to ignore Him, and His Word, while we instruct our children?”

Moreover, Christ requires – in the greatest commandment, no less! – that His people love the Lord their God with all their minds. “If our children are not taught to think like Christians when they study math, history, or science,” Wilson writes, “then they are not obeying the command to love God with *all* their minds.”

What’s more, God expects parents to *protect* their children. “Because pluralism (with regard to worldviews) is a false theology (it is institutional agnosticism), Christian parents are required to protect their children from this lie,” Wilson writes. “Because the public schools are an established institution, required by law to teach and practice agnosticism, Christian parents are obligated to protect children from exposure to this false teaching. ... It is hard to imagine us having this debate about Christian kids in Vacation Bible Schools run by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. So why do we treat agnosticism as a preferable heresy?”

Wilson dismisses the oft-heard argument that we should send our children to be “salt and light” in the government system. “Sending children into an intellectual, ethical, and religious war zone without adequate training and preparation is a violation of charity,” he writes. We wouldn’t send our seven-year-olds to an Iraqi battlefield or an African mission field; those are jobs for well-trained adults.

In sum, Wilson writes, “Christian parents who seek to educate their children in the government school system allow their children to be instructed according to the tenets of another religion.”

Conclusion

For years Dr. James Dobson told his readers and listeners not to abandon the public schools. But that changed on March 28, 2002. For the first time, Dobson told his radio audience (some 5 million listeners) that because of the radical changes taking place in public education (mainly regarding the homosexual agenda), he would not

place his child in a public school in California or any other state that moves in that direction. “In the state of California, if I had a child there, I wouldn’t put the youngster in a public school,” he said. “I think it’s time to get our kids out.”

A few months later, Dobson went even further: “It isn’t just California that has drifted into this dangerous stuff. This is where we are, especially on both coasts, but to some degree throughout the nation.” And it’s not just about homosexuality, he said. “The shocking thing is that this threat to kids is much, much broader than the homosexual movement. It doesn’t stop there. It is aimed at the very core of the Judeo-Christian system of values, the very core of scriptural values. I’m telling you that is not an overstatement.”

“It is our vulnerable children who will be sacrificed if we keep them in a godless environment,” Dobson said (emphasis added). “Speaking personally, the welfare of my boy or girl would take priority over the need to influence the local public school.” In this, Dobson echoes Martin Luther, who advised “no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not increasingly occupied with the Word of God must become corrupt. ... I am much afraid that schools will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth.”

Just as Catholics (page 4) and Jews (page 16) have a fundamental right to choose a school consistent with their own convictions, so do evangelicals. “Parents have a fundamental right – written into the various international covenants protecting human rights – to choose the schooling that will shape their children’s understanding of the world,” says Boston University education professor Charles L. Glenn. “But a right isn’t really a right if it can’t be exercised.”

After paying handsomely to prop up the government’s school system, many overtaxed Oklahomans cannot afford to choose Christian education. That’s why we should pray and work for school choice. 🍎

OCPA research director Brandon Dutcher’s articles have appeared in more than 150 newspapers throughout Oklahoma and the United States.



Fathers know best: School choice can make a difference.

Many parents are able to exercise school choice today only because of the philanthropic efforts of others. K-12 scholarship-granting organizations, such as the Oklahoma Scholarship Fund, Children First America, and the Children's Scholarship Fund, enable underprivileged children to attend private schools. The thank-you letters these philanthropic foundations receive from parents are more powerful than any school-choice policy paper, book, or editorial column could ever be. Below are a couple of letters sent to the Children's Scholarship Fund from grateful fathers.

- "I can't tell you how much this scholarship means to our family. Our son, Jay, was struggling in public school. He had a large class with many behavior problems and distractions. He was falling behind in all subjects and couldn't get the extra help needed. We were at our wit's end. We didn't want Jay to fall through the cracks and just get pushed along, so we decided to switch him to a local Catholic school.

"We went over our finances and decided that even though we couldn't afford the tuition, we couldn't afford not to make the switch. This school has made all the difference in the world to our son. There is a strict dress code, they set high standards, and they have high expectations of all the children. We did not qualify for financial aid, because we are not Catholic.

"When we heard about the Children's Scholarship Fund, we decided to apply. We were overjoyed to the point of tears when you informed us that we were accepted into the program. Both Heather and I work at low-paying jobs, our oldest son Will has insulin-dependent diabetes since age five and only recently have

we received any type of medical insurance, so money has always been tight. Your fund has and will help our family tremendously. Thank you so much."

- "Thank you so much, every day, for your commitment to what is so desperately needed. Frankly, I see the situation in the public education as a crisis in the future of our nation, starting small in the lives of families in every city and town. Those of us who have tried our best to work within the system, realize that simply the system itself must change. Many parents, like myself, can't live with just allowing our kids to be guinea pigs for an insufficient educational system as it 'works through' its problems. Great steps forward have been made recently in bringing choices into the mainstream. ... Maybe when all parents can afford to choose, the system will be forced to upgrade to meet the needs of the citizens. Until then, never forget you made a difference." 🍀



Grandparents

need to understand that today's public schools nowhere resemble the kind of schools we attended back in the 1930s and '40s.

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

At 76, I am at the age of a grandparent, even though I don't have any grandchildren. But I understand how concerned grandparents are about the education of their grandchildren. When the subject of school choice comes up, many grandparents can't understand why their sons and daughters are seeking education for their kids outside of the public school system. We seniors all went to public school and got a pretty decent education, free of charge. So why would any of today's parents want anything different?

The reason is that today's public schools nowhere resemble the kind of schools we attended

back in the 1930s and '40s. Remember those schools? We sat in desks that were bolted to the floor. The desks were in rows and you looked at the back of the person in front of you. The floors were clean and the walls were pretty bare. Maybe there was a picture of George Washington. Discipline was strict and you did not speak aloud to the student next to you. The teacher sat at the front of the class behind her desk. She was the focus of attention. She taught everyone the same thing. There was no such thing as an Individual Learning Plan.

And the teaching methods she used were the same tried-and-true methods developed over generations. She taught reading with phonics and arithmetic by rote memorization. She taught correct spelling. We learned to write in the cursive manner, using pen and ink. I clearly remember the inkwell on my desk. I never saw anyone play with an inkwell or spray anyone with ink. We were all well behaved because we knew what a trip to the principal's office meant.

In those days there was no such thing as attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, or reading disability. If you went to school you learned to read. No ifs, ands, or buts. Today, there are six million children on Ritalin, rampant reading disability, print-script instead of cursive handwriting, lots of math failure, and lots of attention deficit disorder. How come? Well, let's look at today's classroom, and I think you'll quickly see why kids are having so much trouble in school these days.

In today's elementary classroom, the kids are now seated around tables where they can socialize. Each child has his or her individual education program. So everyone is doing something different. The kids are talking to one another, pestering one another, coughing and sneezing into each other's faces. In the old days you coughed at the back of the head in front of you. Today, you cough directly into your fellow student's face.

The teacher is no longer the focus of attention. She's now a "facilitator," roaming around the room, chatting with one student, helping another. Her desk is in the corner piled high with papers and books. She now uses the most ridiculous

teaching methods ever invented by man. For reading, she uses whole language, which teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese – memorizing whole words by their shapes, like Chinese characters, instead of learning the sounds of the letters.

As for math, she now teaches math concepts instead of requiring her pupils to memorize the arithmetic facts. Penmanship is a thing of the past. Kids now learn to print instead of learning cursive handwriting. If she does teach cursive, it is in the third grade after the kids' printing habits have become too strong to change. And the kids no longer have to learn to spell correctly. They are taught "creative" or "inventive" spelling, and they develop poor spelling habits.

And one reason why so many kids develop attention deficit disorder is that there are many distractions in the classroom, which makes it impossible for them to concentrate. The walls are

covered with posters, cartoons, and just about everything and anything to distract a child. Then there are gerbils, rabbits, or fish tanks for additional distraction. Plus mobiles hanging

from the ceiling swaying in the breeze. Plus noise. The teaching methods confuse and frustrate the child, and the child becomes angry and acts up. The solution is a prescription for Ritalin or some other drug to control the child's behavior.

Now I hope you understand why your sons and daughters want to get their kids out of that chaotic atmosphere where it is very difficult to learn anything. That is why they want choice. As for choice, my favorite is home schooling, because that's where grandparents can really help out. You have life experience. You have stories to tell. And kids love to hear stories. You can help teach reading and arithmetic, history and geography, science and invention. You can tell them what it was like to grow up in the old days. And that's the way to really enjoy being a grandparent. 🍷

Samuel Blumenfeld has taught in both public and private schools, and has written about education for more than 30 years. His books include *How to Tutor*, *The New Illiterates*, and *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*.

Teachers today use the most ridiculous teaching methods ever invented by man.

Hh

Hispanic children are being left behind. School choice can help.

By Isabel Azuola-Lyman

Once upon a time Gloria Fajardo and I used to ride the school bus together. That's not all we had in common.

Both our fathers served in the U.S. Army; we spoke Spanish; we played the guitar and were fans of Carlos Santana; and we graduated from the same high school. Our Lady of Lourdes Academy was an all-girls school in South Florida that required an entrance exam for admission.

After high school, my interest in Santana and the guitar waned. Gloria, conversely, joined a band with her new husband, Emilio Estefan, and became an international singing sensation.

Arsenio Hall once interviewed the diva from Havana, Cuba. The pair discussed higher education. Gloria talked about her professors at the University of Miami and described her energetic mother as "Joe College."

I understood what my former classmate meant when she used that phrase. Young, middle-class Hispanic-Americans who grew up in the '70s

heard many lectures from their parents about the importance of obtaining *una educación* (an education). Our elders viewed the United States as the land of economic and academic opportunity.

Since my salad days, Hispanics' attitudes toward learning haven't changed. The 2002 National Survey of Latinos revealed that more than three quarters of adults – whether they hail from Cali, Colombia; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; or Managua, Nicaragua – think that Hispanic children who grow up in the United States will receive a better education than they did.

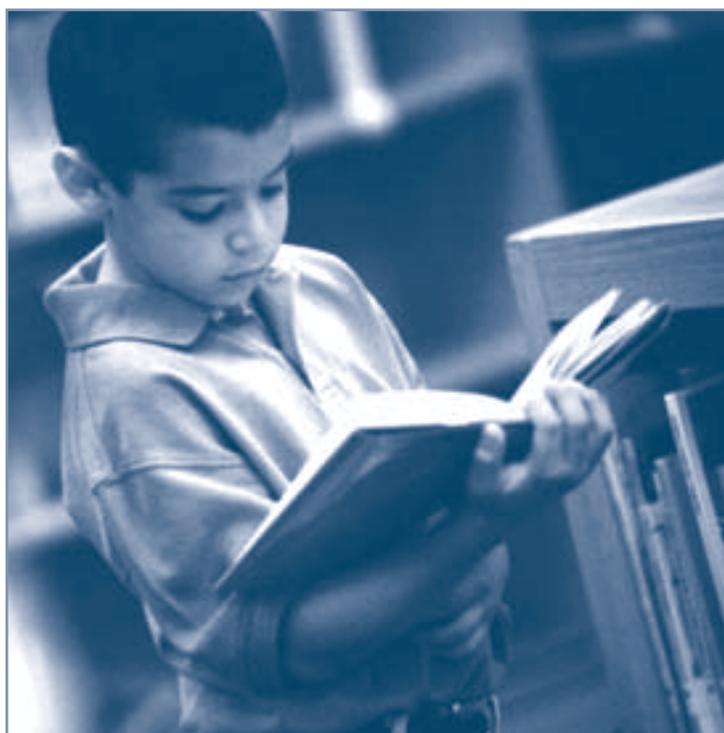
Unfortunately, the opposite is true. "Latinos are the least well-educated segment of the American population," reports the Pew Hispanic Center. In fact, only 57 percent of Hispanics finish high school, in contrast to 89 percent of whites. In

Oklahoma, the scores from the National Assessment of Education Progress are also revealing – only half of Hispanic 4th graders demonstrate competent reading skills.

One of the reasons for the meltdown is that lower-income Hispanic youth are concentrated in cities where the neighborhood schools they attend are failing. Not only are the buildings and

grounds ugly, but the teachers are more preoccupied with crowd control than with imparting knowledge. These "schools" are a complete waste of taxpayer money and cause more prosperous families to flee to the suburbs.

So, can anything be done to liberate a studious Ricardo or Carmencita from this 12-year sentence? *Sí*. School choice!



This is an ideal policy for states, like Oklahoma, that have a burgeoning population of Hispanics and where a menu of choices (magnet schools, online programs, religious academies, home schools, etc.) exists. Hispanics themselves want more alternatives than the status quo (government assignment based on geographic district).

Douglas Dewey of the Children's Scholarship Fund says that in 1999 the parents of at least a quarter of a million Latino children applied to his organization for a partial scholarship to attend a private school. *Education Week* reports that the left-wing National Council of La Raza has "raised \$10 million to create and support 50 charter schools nationwide that will be aimed at Latinos." The *Tulsa World* reported February 10 that "a San Miguel school could open in Tulsa next year, offering a private education to low-income Hispanic families that have never had the option of private school." Home schooling parent Jorge Gomez, a former resident of Oklahoma City, offers seminars to fellow Mexicans about the educate-at-home option. And the Gloria Estefan Foundation has a mission of "funding annual scholarships for students who need financial assistance."

The chattering classes sometimes stereotype Latinos as the group of immigrants "who do the dirty work that others won't do." Certainly, manual labor is an honorable way to earn a living. But average Central or South Americans, who leave their homelands because they prize literacy, don't advise their sons and daughters: "If you work hard in America, you can grow up to be a dishwasher." They probably ask their child what my husband asks our teenaged son: "Have you ever thought of becoming a doctor?"

The people of the United States have a marvelous gift for encouraging newcomers to dream big dreams while holding them to high standards. Choice in education gives deserving Hispanic parents a shot at tapping into that winning formula.

School choice ... *para los niños!* ♥

Former Edmond resident Isabel Azuola-Lyman is the daughter of Costa Rican immigrants. She has written for OCPA and the Cato Institute, and is the author of *The Homeschooling Revolution*.



Inner-city
children stand to
gain the most
from school choice,
but they need it now.
Their childhood
won't wait.

By Jerome A. Holmes

Inner-city residents should favor school choice programs, including vouchers. For too long, poor children who are disproportionately black and brown have been trapped in inner-city public schools that do not provide them with a meaningful education. Many of these schools are virtual war zones.

Voucher programs empower poor parents and give them significant control over their children's education, by permitting them to use tax dollars to send their children to private schools. Middle-class and wealthy parents have long practiced school choice. In contrast, without vouchers, it is very difficult for low-income parents to free their children from failing schools. They can't afford to place their children in private schools or to move to affluent suburban communities where the public schools are typically better.

The limited available data strongly suggest that voucher programs work. Harvard University professor Paul E. Peterson has reported that African-American students who have been permitted to attend private schools under voucher programs in large urban school districts, in New York City and Dayton, Ohio, scored significantly higher on standardized tests than comparable students who remained in the public schools. Moreover, the parents of these private school students were much more satisfied with the educational services that the schools provided to their children; the class sizes were likely to be smaller and their children were given more homework.

Support for voucher programs is growing among African-Americans, historically a large segment of inner-city residents. In July 2002, only a few days

after the U.S. Supreme Court found Cleveland's voucher program constitutional, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that polls showed more black parents than white support vouchers: 68 percent of black parents favored vouchers, compared with 57 percent of the general public. More recent polling results from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a public policy think tank that tracks African-American opinion, confirm this.

Historically, African-Americans have been wary of voucher programs. Perhaps this is because the programs were initially supported by those who wanted to give poor white families a way to keep their children out of largely minority public schools. But African-Americans in large numbers apparently have begun to recognize that they are the group that probably stands to gain the most from greater school choice. As the *Journal* reported, they have started to view vouchers as a "modern-day civil-rights issue." The higher quality of education that voucher programs promise will help to unlock the doors of economic opportunity and social advancement for African-Americans.

To be sure, African-American leaders of traditional civil rights organizations like the NAACP have opposed voucher programs. However, their organizations have longstanding ties to school employee labor unions, which view vouchers as a dangerous threat to the educational status quo, in which teachers bear little or no accountability for their students' educational failures. Consequently, these African-American leaders may not be capable of impartially evaluating the merits of voucher programs.

Oklahoma and other states should begin implementing voucher programs now. In our fast-moving information age, children face grave risks to their life chances every day they are forced to accept the substandard product of decaying public schools. True, positive reforms are underway in some public school systems, including those in Oklahoma. Such reforms should be actively supported, especially when they are focused, like charter schools, on expanding parental choice. But poor children in low-performing public schools shouldn't have to wait another generation for these reforms to fully take root. As the African-American poet Langston Hughes wrote more than a

half century ago, "I do not need my freedom when I'm dead/ I cannot live on tomorrow's bread." 🍌

Jerome A. Holmes is an assistant U.S. attorney in Oklahoma City. The views expressed here are his own, and do not represent the views of the U.S. attorney's office or the Justice Department.



Jewish
education –
in day schools that
are affordable to all
– is the most
powerful vehicle for
Jewish growth.

By Seth Leibsohn and
Chester E. Finn, Jr.

The Jewish community has long been committed to excellent education, both in America's public schools and in distinctively Jewish schools. Once upon a time, the Jewish community also supported such important civil rights as equal educational opportunity for all children. There's been slippage, however, and the mainstream Jewish community's reaction to the Cleveland school-choice program, settled last summer by the Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, is a prime example. Both the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee – former pillars of the civil-rights community – filed amicus briefs opposing the school choice plan in Cleveland.

In opposing the Cleveland plan, they placed themselves squarely against the greatest educational movement for civil rights in our generation. Now that the Court has decided the case in favor of the Ohio school choice program, these civil-rights groups have put themselves in opposition to constitutional precedent; to the school needs of poor, minority children; to freedom; and to better education. Not a very satisfactory place to be.

What next? If the ADL, for example, can now find it opportune to praise Christian-conservative strategist Ralph Reed as it recently has done – after years of screeds against him – these Jewish organizations can now take this moment to renew

their commitment to civil rights in education.

It's no secret that education choice works for Jewish youngsters. The value inherent in the Hebrew school and Jewish day school was recently recognized by Rabbi Eric Yoffie in his sermon at the Boston Biennial: "One of the great ironies of Jewish life is that the Hebrew school, the butt of a thousand jokes, is often not a failure at all. Our educators and rabbis, working under difficult conditions, have frequently succeeded in creating schools that provide supportive community and spiritual connectedness; that teach our children to do Jewishly and know Jewish things."

The Rabbi echoes the feelings of many in the Jewish community and scholars across the political spectrum agree. For example, both Alan Dershowitz, author of *The Vanishing American Jew*, and Elliott Abrams, author of *Faith or Fear*, recognize that Jewish day schools are keys to Jewish continuity. A report commissioned by the Council of Jewish Federations concluded that, "intensive Jewish education is our most powerful vehicle for Jewish growth." The same study also determined that the best vehicle for such growth is "to make day school education available and affordable to all who might want it."

Public policies designed to foster school choice for all children would do precisely that, not only for Jewish youngsters but for all young Americans. Unfortunately, Rabbi Yoffie, the ADL, and the AJC have failed to support choice in education for other people's children. Rather, they condemn it, saying, in Yoffie's case, that he is "embarrassed and ashamed" when he hears Jews arguing in favor of school choice, which he refers to as "a highfalutin principle that is often nothing more than naked self-interest dressed up as caring." He avers that school choice proponents are turning their backs on public education.

The truth is that the Jewish community has always been deeply committed to the public education system in the United States, a system that, for the most part, has served them and others well. This is true of most school choice

advocates, too. They're not hostile to public education. Rather, they're dismayed that a school system that was once the country's pride has, sadly and too often, become an embarrassment that today ill serves many children, especially those in greatest need of it. All Americans must face the reality that public schools, in too many cases, are failing. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that nearly a third of Oklahoma 4th graders cannot solve basic math problems, and more than a third of the state's 8th graders are in the same boat. The NAEP reading tests show that 34 percent of Oklahoma 4th graders and 20 percent of 8th graders score below basic levels.

In Cleveland, for instance, a federal court inspired the voucher program because that city's public school system was so bad it – to quote from the Supreme Court – "had failed to meet any of the 18 state standards for minimal acceptable performance. Only 1 in 10 9th graders could pass a basic proficiency examination, and students at all levels performed at a dismal rate

**Jewish day
schools are
key to Jewish
continuity.**

compared with students in other Ohio public schools. More than two-thirds of high school students either dropped or failed out before graduation. Of those students who managed to reach their senior year, one of every four still failed to graduate. Of those students who did graduate, few could read, write, or compute at levels comparable to their counterparts in other cities." And these were primarily minority students.

Rabbi Yoffie contends that school choice "will mostly benefit the middle class and the wealthy." Not only is this ugly class-warfare rhetoric. It's also untrue. The truth is that school choice – as the Supreme Court recognized in the Cleveland case – does most for disadvantaged children by affording them the same quality education opportunities that the middle class and wealthy are able to arrange for themselves. (Half of U.S. Senators and one-third of House members send their own children to private schools.) The middle class and wealthy have made their choices by selecting their

neighborhoods and their schools, public or private or – in recent years – charter. Too many poor parents don't have those choices, which means their children don't have too many chances. The case for school choice is moral, not political: It levels the playing field, neutralizing the role that personal wealth and privilege once played. Access to an excellent education should be a civil right enjoyed by all, gentile and Jew, not a privilege restricted to the fortunate.

The Supreme Court has now erased the contention that school choice necessarily violates the First Amendment. Ohio constructed a voucher program that does not; so have Wisconsin and Florida. So can other jurisdictions. Properly structured, choice enables children to attend a wide array of schools, including religious and secular schools, as they prefer. Families make those decisions, not the government. The First Amendment was established to protect religion and religious freedom, not to penalize children and parents seeking a better education. The point of school choice is not whether a school is religious or not, the point is whether it is good for children or not.

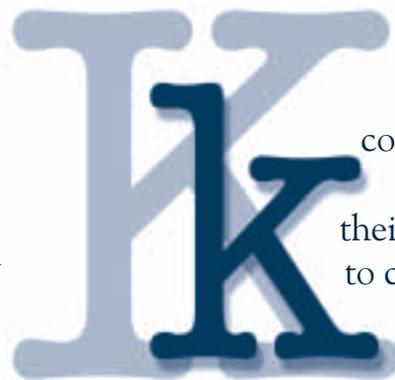
The Cleveland choice plan has empowered thousands of low-income and minority youngsters to escape failing public schools. It has empowered thousands of parents to get their children the kind of education they could not otherwise afford. They are allowed to direct scholarships of up to \$2,250 toward participating religious or nonreligious schools. The constitutionality of this program is now a benchmark – and landmark – for the protection for every child's fundamental right to receive the best education possible.

By and large, the Orthodox Jewish community in America has sustained itself by enrolling its own children in schools dedicated to the advancement of Jewish education. What an irony that, as Elliott Abrams has noted, "the elements of the Jewish community having the greatest difficulty keeping their children Jewish use the courts to attack the practice by which elements having the greatest success keep their children Jewish." For parents who prefer not to send their children to Orthodox schools, the Reform and Conservative schools provide equally respectable education options. So do Catholic, Lutheran, and secular private

schools. It's the parents' choice – and if their public school suits their needs, that is fine, too.

School choice would confer many benefits on America. One of them is helping to solve the problem of declining Jewish-American identity. It will also stimulate competition that will strengthen our public schools, and it will help those children trapped in a failing system from which they cannot afford to escape. Jewish leaders once marched hand in hand with other minorities in pursuit of equal educational opportunities. They should again. Far from being "embarrassed and ashamed" to endorse school choice, they should embrace it as a worthy and important cause. 🍀

Seth Leibsohn is the director of policy at Empower America. Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and a former assistant secretary of education.



Kids'

lives can be completely turned around when their parents are able to choose a different school.

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (www.baeo.org) is a national organization that supports parental choice to empower families and increase educational options for black children. BAEO has numerous success stories it can shout from the housetops. Here are three of them. **'Without the Vouchers, These Children Would Be Lost'**

For the past 17 years, Roberta Kitchen has been raising five children abandoned by their mother who was strung out on drugs and alcohol. Roberta is raising DeAntye, Tiara, Tatiana, and Toshika. Tiffany is living on her own after graduating from high school. Roberta reflects on her struggle to raise and educate her children before and after vouchers became available through the Cleveland

Scholarship and Tutoring Program:

“These babies came from a rough world. Even while they were living, they were dying. I just couldn’t let them die.

“I wanted them to break out of the system that was their family. I did not want them to grow up on the welfare rolls. I had to show them another way. The key was and is a good education,” says Roberta, who is a college graduate and works in a professional position for a Cleveland corporation.

Roberta struggled through a variety of public schools that did not meet her children’s needs.

“It is very stressful knowing that your children are not learning and that they are not safe because they are corralled in a room with kids who are acting out to get attention.

“I went back and forth through the public schools. I talked to teachers until we were blue in the face. My kids had some good teachers. But so many of them were so frustrated and just threw their hands up.

“I was always at the public school. Whenever the public schools had meetings, I would be there. There was so much broken. I was so disillusioned with the system.

“My daughter couldn’t read. She was in the 6th grade. I had been back and forth with her since the 4th grade. I noticed as I tried to help her with her homework that she couldn’t read. But she was getting Bs and Cs on her report card.

“I asked the school to hold her back because she wasn’t ready to go on to the next grade. They said they couldn’t do it because she wasn’t failing.”

Roberta’s experience was much the same as she labored to educate her other children. “I didn’t want my children’s attitude and spirit to die in school.”

So, she turned to private schools. But, ultimately, despite financial help from the schools and her extended family, Roberta could not afford the tuition.

“I would stay up at night looking through the newspapers trying to find a night job to supplement my day job to get money to pay for their schooling. People suggested that I lie about my residence so I could enroll my children in a better public school district. And it happens. People do that. But I couldn’t.

“I thought about moving out of Cleveland. But

I bought my house before I had children so I was rooted here. Then, I spent all my money on tuition so I had no money left to fix up the house so I could sell it and move. I was stuck.

“At times I felt I had nowhere to turn. Then the voucher program came and gave me a choice. I felt as though I had a chance now to at least fight for them.”

With the help of the Cleveland Scholarship Program, Roberta was able to enroll the children in St. John Nottingham Lutheran Elementary School. Toshika continues there with the help of the voucher program. DeAntye and Tiara are in high school and therefore no longer eligible for the program. Tatiana is being home schooled.

“Without the voucher program, I think these children would be on the streets. I know they would be lost. They would have no desire to learn. I look at my girls and they are beautiful, and I know they would be caught up with the baby thing and being on welfare. My son would be in the drug world.

“Parents need the right to give their children a chance. We are the ones who know our children. We should be working in partnership with teachers who can actually take our suggestions and make them work.

“When we finally got enrolled in St. John’s, there was a sense of satisfaction. I could go to the school and talk with the principal and teachers and explain the weaknesses and strengths that I saw in my children, and they would listen and make adjustments in the way they delivered the curriculum.

“I will not always be there to take care of my children. They need to know how to take care of themselves and compete in this world. I want them to go toe-to-toe with people from other cultures and backgrounds and to succeed.

“The opportunity to give them that came through the voucher program.”

Illiterate, Yet on the Honor Roll

Cassandra and Jonathan K. Galloway have one child participating in the Florida Opportunity Scholarship Program. Jonathan D. Galloway attends Sacred Heart Cathedral. Cassandra shares this story of her son’s struggle for educational opportunities:

“My son attended Spencer Bibbs Public School.

He was making As and Bs on his report card and when he got tested, he could not read. My son was on the honor roll and he could not read. He knew math but he couldn't read.

"He would come home from Spencer Bibbs saying he didn't like himself. He never had homework.

"I kept going to the school and I kept going for meetings with the teachers. When I was there asking a lot of questions, they were paying attention to his problems. But when I wasn't around, he wasn't getting what he needed to learn. So, I decided to look into the Opportunity Scholarships.

"Everybody at Sacred Heart knows Jonathan. He feels like he's somebody. He feels like he's important. He was a very shy child but now he comes home and he's more outgoing and confident. He is secure of himself.

"Jonathan says he likes the way they talk to him at Sacred Heart. He says they are more polite. At the public school they were always yelling.

"The teacher sent a note home every day about how he was doing, whether he had a good day or a bad day. If he missed a day of school, the office and the teacher would call. I get two calls. They let me know right away. The teacher wants to know if he's sick or how he's feeling. I know that they really care about him.

"Towards the end of the school year they had a service and he begged me to come. So I took off from work and I went there to surprise him. I was the one who was surprised. He got up and sang a song. I could not believe it. He stood up in front of the whole school, all by himself.

"He plays basketball and won a trophy. Spencer Bibbs didn't have any after-school activities – just going into the cafeteria after school to do homework and play board games.

"I see that he can read. He's not excellent but he is better than when he was at Spencer Bibbs. He gets up in the morning ready to go to school.

"When I told him that if we lost the court case, he couldn't go to Sacred Heart next year, he started to cry. I don't know what I'm going to do if the scholarship program ends."

'It Has Really Turned This Child Around'

LaTrisha Moore has three children, two of whom, Korben Moore-Curry and Kristopher

Stallworth, are school age. Korben attends St. Michael's through the Florida Opportunity Scholarship Program, which he became eligible for when A.A. Dixon Public Elementary School failed the state testing program. Kristopher attends A.A. Dixon and is not eligible for the scholarship program because he did not attend the school the year it failed.

"Korben wasn't doing very well at Dixon. He did not want to read or practice the alphabet. It was a bad experience. Learning was not fun to him.

"At Dixon, they rarely sent anything home. There were no progress reports or test scores or information about his attitude. I would have to go up to the school and ask all kinds of questions to find things out.

"At St. Michael's, they make an effort to know you and let you know what is going on with your child. I was seeing progress reports every week about what he was doing and what he was not doing. I would have to sign it and return it. I would know what was going on and I would take care of it or I would congratulate him.

"Going to St. Michael's has made a total difference in him. He really wants to learn.

"They really care. They take time out with the child. They help him. St. Michael's has gotten him into learning. I'm very excited about that.

"Just by being in this program for only one year, it has really turned this child around.

"St. Michael's is a mixed school. You have blacks and whites and Chinese. Everyone is together. There is no isolation by race. You see more whites than at Dixon.

"I really hate that my five-year-old has to go to Dixon, but I really have no other choice. The school barely passed this year. If I had the money now, I'd take Kris from A.A. Dixon and I'd pay for it.

"But, when you don't have a lot of money you just have to work with what you have. You have to live where you can afford. I need to be close to transportation because I don't have a car. I can't move to a better public school area.

"It's a really messed up situation when there's nothing you can do for your child's education. But the voucher gives you a choice." 🍎

I Learning-Disabled

students in Oklahoma – many wrongfully diagnosed – would benefit from a Florida-style voucher that allows them to choose private schools.

By Jay P. Greene
and Greg Forster

The issue of education for disabled children is being shaped by an alarming increase in special education enrollments. Nationwide, special education is now approaching almost 13 percent of all students. This explosive growth is producing demands for increased subsidies for special education.

But before we rush to increase the subsidy, it is important to understand what is causing this growth. Some people say there really are more disabled kids. Others suspect that high-stakes tests are driving schools to push low-performing students into special education. But a new study released by the Manhattan Institute finds that the most important culprit for the rise in special education is the set of financial incentives produced by the way special education is funded in most states.

The funding system used in Oklahoma and most other states, which some education officials candidly refer to as “the bounty system,” pays school districts more for each additional student diagnosed with a disability. This provides a perverse financial incentive for schools to diagnose more students. By comparing the rates of growth in special education enrollment in states with and without the bounty funding system, we found that 62 percent of the increase in special education

during the 1990s in states with the bounty system can be attributed to financial incentives. Nationwide, this represents roughly 390,000 extra students placed in special education because of financial incentives, resulting in additional spending of over \$2.3 billion per year. In Oklahoma, we estimate there are roughly 9,060 extra students placed in special education, resulting in additional spending of \$53,618,918 per year.

While we would like to think that something as important as placing a student in special education would be immune to financial considerations, the hard reality is that incentives alter people’s behavior. If it is financially advantageous to move students into special education, school systems will seek to influence the rate at which students are diagnosed. And it is no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of the growth in special

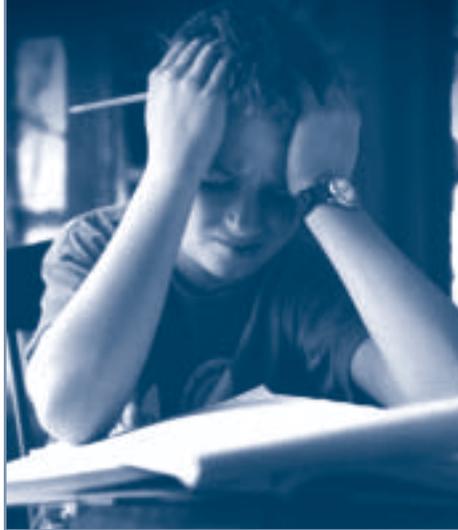
education has taken place in the “specific learning disability” category, which is both among the most subjective disabilities to diagnose and among the cheapest to serve.

If it were true that there really are more disabled children, because of changes in the environment or medical technology, then we would expect to see increases in all sorts of disabilities. In fact, enrollments for disabilities that are more objective to diagnose and more expensive to treat have been either declining or essentially flat for 25 years. Nor are high-stakes accountability systems responsible for

the increases in special education. We compared the growth of special education enrollments in states with and without high-stakes testing, and

“Opponents of parental choice claim that private schools won’t take special education students. Why don’t we test their hypothesis?”

— Matthew Brouillette,
author of the OCPA report
“The Case for Choice in Schooling”



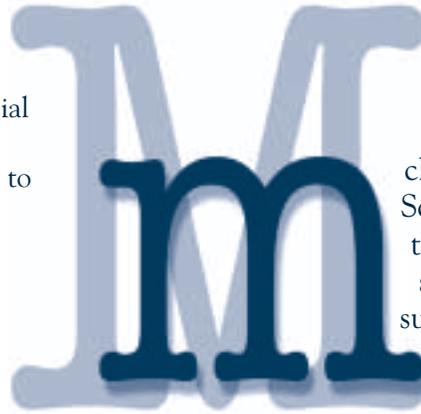
found no relationship between growth in special education enrollment and testing.

Some educators are sure to object that financial incentives cannot explain the rise in special education because the cost of providing services to disabled students far exceeds the bounties they bring in. However, much of the money that is labeled as special education spending is actually money that would have been spent anyway. For example, if a school hires additional teachers to tutor students who are behind in reading, that comes out of the regular school budget. But if those students are reclassified as learning disabled, that spending becomes special education spending, and is now subsidized by the state. The best proof that financial incentives matter is that special education has been growing much faster in states where those incentives are present.

What can be done? Obviously, the best solution would be for Oklahoma and other bounty states to follow the lead of the 16 states that have dumped the bounty system in favor of funding systems that don't create perverse incentives. Oklahoma could also follow the lead of Florida, which has already made a start on another solution. The state's popular McKay Scholarship Program provides vouchers to disabled students, which mitigates perverse financial incentives since placing a student in special education does not automatically bring more money into a school district's budget. The effects of the McKay program are not reflected in the Manhattan Institute study because it includes data through the 2000–01 school year, when the McKay program had not yet grown to a significant scale.

Obviously, no one wants to return to the days when public schools regularly denied admission to students with disabilities. But Congress and the Oklahoma legislature would be wise to consider how the subsidies that enticed schools to provide services to disabled students can also entice massive levels of misdiagnosis if proper checks are not in place. Pouring more money into the same old system would only make the problem that much worse. 🍎

Jay P. Greene is a senior fellow and Greg Forster is a senior research associate at the Manhattan Institute's Education Research Office.



Mothers

understand that each of their children is different. School choice allows them to choose the school that is best suited for each child.

By Pilar Gomez

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) turned 10 years old in 2001. I'm overwhelmed by the difference it has made for our children.

As a mother of four children – three of whom use school choice – I know firsthand that school choice has created higher standards, more accountable schools, and more active parents. Since both public and private schools have improved with school choice, not only do we have more real options as parents, but all of those options are better. This revolution in education should be expanded to every city in America.

My oldest son, Andres, is a perfect example of how school choice has made a difference.

When the MPCP was expanded in 1995, we enrolled Andres in 3rd grade at St. Lawrence Elementary School, a private school, as a school-choice student. As a result of a court injunction against the expansion, we couldn't afford to keep our daughter there, but with Andres's history of struggles, we knew we had to make sacrifices to keep him at St. Lawrence.

At St. Lawrence, the teacher told me right away that, even though Andres was not a behavior problem, he had trouble maintaining focus for more than a couple of minutes. Teachers at his public school had never noticed because Andres was well behaved ... and because their expectations for his academic performance were not high.

Smaller classes at St. Lawrence allowed his teacher to recognize there was a problem, but we decided to move him to public school because they had more resources to cope with his special needs. This is the beauty of school choice: My child attends the school that's best for him,

whether it is public or private.

Andres now attends Prince of Peace, a private school near our home, through the MPCP, which expanded in 1997 to include religious schools after the Institute for Justice helped beat back legal challenges from the teachers' unions. This school has resources to address his special needs that it didn't have before school choice expanded. Andres is flourishing here; his academic performance is improving because teachers have higher expectations, and – for the first time – he feels like he's normal.

Prince of Peace is the right school for Andres, but all of my children have different needs. Not all of them need a religious education or a special education, but all of my kids do need a quality education.

Public schools are feeling the pressure of competition that school choice has prompted, and they are responding. Milwaukee Public Schools are advertising to bring students back. They're making improvements to treat students more like respected individuals than bodies in a classroom.

There's still a long way to go, but the accountability that school choice brings is moving public schools, as well as private schools, in the right direction.

Parents are even becoming more involved in both public and private schools because now that they have options, they also feel they have more of an influence on the success of their children's education.

Andres's journey to academic success has been rocky, but his newfound self-worth is priceless. He is only one child out of millions. Imagine how much of a difference we can make if we expand school choice nationwide!

What I see in Milwaukee should happen in schools across America. Rather than continuing to pump money into saving the public school system, we need to figure out ways to save our *children* by offering them education that works, no matter whether it is public or private, secular or religious.

Every child is different, and we've sacrificed far too many of them already. 🍌

Pilar Gomez is a school-choice parent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Native Americans

can teach us a thing or two about education.

By David Yeagley

In the old days, the first lesson taught a Comanche baby was that crying accomplished nothing. Whining and whimpering brought no rewards. That baby might find himself packed in a little *kawn* (papoose), hanging from a tree limb till the breezes lulled him to sleep.

Modern psychologists may want to say that such “training” formed a stern and stoic people, but Comanches were unusually pragmatic. Life was all about utility and eliminating all that was superfluous. In a way, old Comanche life represented one of the most advanced stages of the human race.

American education today might take a lesson from the Comanches. In an era of state and national concern over economic priorities, we are behooved to face questions of efficiency in education. Comparing the costs of education to the results in the students indicates that much in the process of education is definitely superfluous, and needs to be eliminated.

In the state of Oklahoma, for instance, between 1990 and 2002, there has been more than a 150 percent increase in spending on education (from \$1 billion to \$2.57 billion), yet the ACT scores of graduating high school students during this period did not show improvement. And this is despite the fact that the tests had been “normed down” twice.

This simply says there is incredible inefficiency in the system. More and more money has been spent, yet student performance remains flat at best. Oklahoma is now considering a state lottery to keep the deficient educational system afloat. A direct appeal to an ancient vice is now being considered an appropriate means of sustaining a deplorably failed operation.

As economics professor Timothy Terrell

pointed out in a recent issue of OCPA's *Perspective*, lower-income people who play lotteries spend three to five times more of their money on lottery tickets than richer people do. Thus, lotteries tend to make the children of poor people in even greater need of "public" education.

However, Oklahoma has proven above all else that *home schooling* provides the best possible education for a child. Oklahoma has developed the most efficient and effective home schooling system in the United States. Reports from the Christian Home Educators Fellowship (www.chefok.org), the National Home Education Research Institute (www.nheri.org), the Home School Legal Defense Association (www.hsllda.org), and the Home School Foundation (www.homeschoolfoundation.org) all offer staggering statistics of success when compared to the current system of American public education.

Dr. Brian D. Ray (NHERI) reports that home schoolers nationally rated in the 85 percentile range on SAT scores, while the national average of public school students was only in the 50 percentile range. Nearly one and a quarter million students in America now are taught at home, by their parents.

I have met some of these home schoolers right here in Oklahoma. I have met Kyle Williams, a 14-year-old veteran columnist for Internet news source World Net Daily (www.worldnetdaily.com), author of a new book *Seen and Heard*, and editor of his own Web site, Capto Veritas (www.captoveritas.com).

I have met two of the most beautiful teenage girls one could possibly imagine, Emoly West and Michelle McGuire. Both possess impeccable poise

and cordiality, and both hold state beauty crowns. Emoly was among the 15 finalists in a national pageant last November, and was also on an Oklahoma state champion girls' basketball team – composed of home schoolers.

Given such evidence, I cannot see but that all parents ought to have the right to choose where and how, and even when their children are educated. The extreme contrasts in the quality of education found in the state of Oklahoma cry out for common sense. Not only should I be able to choose *where* I want to send my child, but also *not* to send him anywhere at all. I have the right to educate him myself.

Remember the Comanche lesson: Drop all that is wasteful and useless. Don't indulge children, for that tends to be wasteful. Children need discipline,



but school is not the place for discipline. Those kinds of survival skills are to be learned at home.

In a Comanche family, in the old days, the child was seldom disciplined with corporal punishment. The highest incentive for desirable behavior was the approval of his fellow tribesmen. The Comanche child was taught that the esteem of his fellows was the highest value, and the people valued

bravery and generosity.

Call it a new concept in education, but character is the best foundation for learning. 🍎

A direct descendant of Comanche warrior Bad Eagle, David Yeagley writes frequently for *The American Enterprise* and other publications. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Oklahoma.



Oklahoma's rural communities

should understand that school choice makes sense for them, too.

By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

Among the predictable questions that arise during just about every discussion of school choice is one along these lines: “We live in a rural community and there’s no other school within 40 miles. How could school choice possibly benefit our children? We have enough troubles making ends meet and keeping our school open.”

Many towns with faltering Title I schools have used a similar excuse for *not* providing public school choice to their students, despite the No Child Left Behind requirement that they do so. “We only have one junior high school,” went the argument, “so it’s not possible to offer intradistrict school choice to those students.”

How compelling is this claim? What can school choice mean in rural and thinly populated parts of the country, in communities with just one or two schools, and in places where a huge “consolidated” school seems to suck all the oxygen from the education air?

I can think of at least five forms of school choice that can “work” under such circumstances. The contention that nothing is possible thus reveals either a failure of imagination or a mischievous attempt to drive a nail into the coffin in which some seek to entomb school choice.

First and most obvious, allow kids to choose public schools in nearby districts. At least a dozen states already give families the right to select any public school in the state. Even where that’s not the case, NCLB says – and the recent Education Department regulations emphasize – that small districts with persistently failing Title I schools are

supposed to make every practicable effort to arrange for students to opt into schools run by other districts. In the NCLB case, the “sending” district is also obliged to provide transportation and may use Title I dollars for this purpose.

Second, deploy some form of voucher to enable children to enroll in private schools – in their own community or nearby. This already happens in parts of northern New England, where small towns, instead of operating their own high schools, “tuition” their youngsters into the public or private schools of their choice. Though rural America is not awash in private schools, it has some – including boarding schools that also take “day students” – and might have more if education funding were portable and could be used in this way.

Third, encourage charter schools. Although there aren’t huge numbers of rural charters, I’ve seen enough of them operating successfully in the Colorado mountains, the Arizona desert, the Minnesota woods, and the California canyons to know that this is possible. The “Annenberg Rural Challenge” gave this development a boost, and it continues in such

The ‘no other school within 40 miles’ argument won’t wash.

organizations as the Colorado Rural Charters Network. Few places are more rural than Idaho, which now boasts some 15 charter schools open or on the way. Alaska is also making good use of this opportunity to bring educational innovations and improvements into remote places.

Fourth, run multiple schools under the same roof, like a cinema multiplex. “Schools within schools” are not a new idea. That’s how public school choice in East Harlem got started, with kids changing schools by climbing the stairs within the same building. But this could also work in rural America – maybe not in wee village primary schools but surely in those big “consolidated” schools. Of the 10 new “specialized” public schools that opened in the Bronx last year, seven are operating within the walls of larger public schools. Medina, Ohio, has four high schools functioning in a single building. Why couldn’t something similar happen in the middle of Kansas, Oklahoma, South Carolina or Montana? A child

might attend a “math-science” school in one wing of the building or switch to an “arts and humanities” school in another. One mini-school might emphasize Core Knowledge while a second does Expeditionary Learning.

Fifth, make use of distance learning and “virtual” education. These were made to order for rural America because they don’t require the child to move at all. Staying right at home – or at the neighbors’, the day-care center or a parent’s workplace – a youngster can change schools by changing the URL on his computer screen. Sure, especially for small children, there also needs to be a competent adult nearby, but if the “virtual” program is solid, the adult-in-the-room-with-the-kid need not be a full-fledged teacher. And older pupils can do a great deal of virtual learning on their own.

This isn’t a new idea, either. “Correspondence” courses were invented ages ago for youngsters lacking ready access to an acceptable brick-and-mortar school. In the Australian outback and remote corners of the Falkland Islands, classes delivered by radio have been available for decades. Today, though, the Internet makes so much more possible. The APEX program beams Advanced Placement courses into high schools that lack the staff or enrollments to provide their own and now offers customized virtual school programs as well. Florida has a statewide virtual high school. Virtual charter schools are proliferating from Pennsylvania and Ohio to California, Colorado and Idaho, as several firms develop Internet-delivered education programs. More families – some but by no means all of them former “home schoolers” – are discovering this way to bring a strong curriculum into their living rooms, even if they live on the remotest mountain top or at the end of a dirt road. (Full disclosure: I’m on the board of one such firm, a terrific outfit known as K12 and led by former Education Secretary William Bennett.)

In sum, education choice makes at least as much sense – and is now as feasible – for rural America as for inner cities and suburbs. The “no other school within 40 miles” argument should be seen for the red herring that it is. 🍎

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and a former assistant secretary of education.



Politicians

should embrace school choice with confidence, knowing that Oklahoma public opinion is with them.

Oklahoma politicians should not shy away from embracing school choice. A recent poll suggests there is wide support for the idea.

The statewide poll was conducted in November 2002 as part of the Oklahoma Opinion Quarterly, a project of the University of Oklahoma Survey Research Center in cooperation with Wilson Research Strategies. The margin of error is +/- 5.7 percent at the 95-percent confidence level.

The poll shows that nearly nine in ten Oklahomans (87 percent) support a parent’s right to choose the school their child attends, and more than six in ten (61 percent) support giving parents tax breaks, or credits, which would allow parents to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice. The poll also shows this issue could become a factor in upcoming elections, as fully seven in ten (70 percent) say they would be more likely to support a candidate that favors school choice over one who opposes it.

1. Please tell me how you feel about a parent’s right to send their children to the school of their choice, be it public, private, or parochial? Would you say you support or oppose a parent’s right to choose the school their child attends?

Strongly support	65
Somewhat support	22
Total Support	87
Somewhat oppose	3
Strongly oppose	8
Total Oppose	11
Don’t Know/Refused	2
2. Similarly, do you support or oppose giving parents tax breaks, or credits, that are to be used specifically for allowing parents to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice?

Strongly support	41
Somewhat support	20
Total Support	61
Somewhat oppose	11
Strongly oppose	25
Total Oppose	36
Don't Know/Refused	3

3. Would you support or oppose a law that would allow a tax credit for donations made by individuals or companies to provide scholarships to children who attend non-public schools?

Strongly support	32
Somewhat support	25
Total Support	56
Somewhat oppose	14
Strongly oppose	25
Total Oppose	39
Don't Know/Refused	5

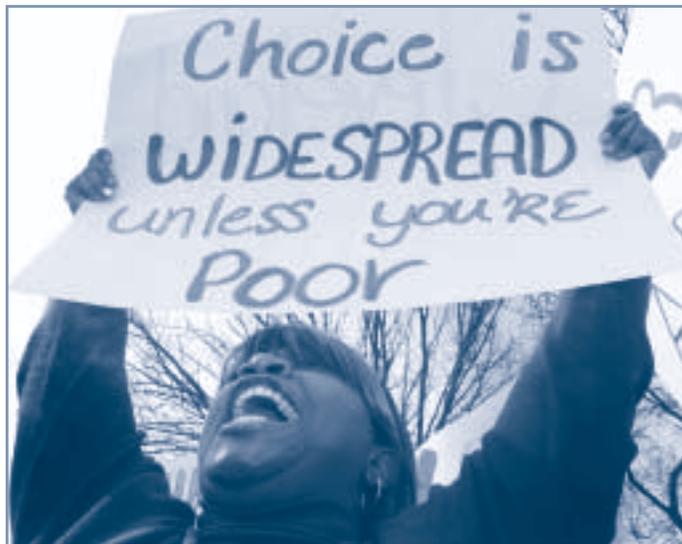
4. I'd like for you to consider the following campaign scenario and tell me, all other things being equal, which candidate you would be more likely to support.

A candidate who **supports parental choice** in education, which allows the parents to choose which school their children will attend

A candidate who **opposes parental choice** in education, which requires a child to attend schools in the district in which they live

Undecided	5
Don't Know/Refused	1

“Clearly this is an issue Oklahomans feel strongly about,” said Chris Wilson, president of Wilson Research Strategies. “Elected officials will ignore school choice at their peril.”



AP Photo/Rick Bowmer



Question:
Why should school choice be limited to the upper- and middle-class?
By Brandon Dutcher

School-choice proponent Jackie Meeks, shown here rallying outside the U.S. Supreme Court, puts it about as eloquently and succinctly as possible: School choice is widespread – unless you're poor.

Upper- and middle-income parents already exercise school choice: They can pay to send their children to private schools, or they can simply move to a neighborhood near better public schools.

Indeed, there are many parents who understand that they have a duty to provide the best possible education for their children, and who exercise school choice in order to perform that duty.

For example, you may recall that the Clintons and the Gores sent their own children to elite private schools.

Same with multimillionaire U.S. senators like Ted Kennedy and Jay Rockefeller. And they should be applauded. Parents should choose the safest and best schools for their children, whether those schools are public or private.

Closer to home, the chairman of the Oklahoma City school board (of all people) exercises school choice. *The Daily Oklahoman* reported of this wealthy corporate executive that “both his children attend private schools – a decision he said his family believes is the best educational choice for their children.” Hooray for educational choice.

Consider also the lively and loquacious liberal on the public-affairs TV show “FlashPoint” – yet another wealthy Oklahoman who has exercised choice for his own progeny.

And consider Oklahoma’s governor, who’s going to spend the next four to eight years in public housing on Oklahoma City’s northeast side. Do you think he’s going to sit idly by while the government assigns his children to an elementary school with woeful test scores, a middle school that issued 524 out-of-school suspensions in the 2000–01 school year, and a high school where the average ACT score is 15.4? The governor cannot be blamed – indeed he should be commended – for making another choice, even if it is simply choosing different public schools.

“Parents have a fundamental right – written into the various international covenants protecting human rights – to choose the schooling that will shape their children’s understanding of the world,” says Boston University education professor Charles L. Glenn. “But a right isn’t really a right if it can’t be exercised.”

School choice for the rich and powerful is all well and good. But why should it stop there? 🍀



Republicans

need to tell it like it is:

Democrat politicians are union-beholden reactionaries who have their boot heels on the necks of poor, black, and Hispanic children.

By David Horowitz

In political warfare the aggressor usually prevails. Aggression is advantageous because politics is a war of position. Position is defined by images that stick. By striking first you can define the issues and can define your adversary. Definition is the decisive move in all political wars.

Democrats are regularly billed as the “education party.” How is that possible? There is a human tragedy enveloping America’s inner cities. Twelve million poor children, mainly black and Hispanic, are trapped in failing government schools that are teaching them nothing. As a

result, they will never get a shot at the American Dream.

Virtually every school board and every administration in inner-city districts is controlled by Democrats, and has been controlled by Democrats for over 50 years. Everything that is wrong with inner-city schools that policy can fix, Democrats are responsible for. Democrats and their allies run the public school system for the benefit of adults at the expense of children. Put in the language of political war: *Democrats have their boot heels on the necks of poor, black and Hispanic children.* But Republicans are too polite to mention it.

How bad is the inner-city school crisis? In Los Angeles, the school district recently defined the problem. Los Angeles officials had declared their intention to end the practice of “social promotion.” But in January 2000, the school district announced it would have to postpone the plan. The reason? A feasibility study showed that if the plan were instituted, officials would have to hold back 350,000 students – *half* the entire school population.

Half the entire school population is learning nothing! This is a social atrocity. It is no secret that these children are poor, Hispanic, and black, and that for them an education is the only chance they will ever have for a better life. But Democrat-controlled schools are teaching them nothing! They will never become part of the new information economy. They will never get decent-paying jobs. And the Democrats – who oppose the opportunity scholarships and school vouchers that would rescue them from this disaster – are doing everything in their power to keep the children trapped in the schools that are failing them.

It gets worse. Shortly after the school district announcement, the Los Angeles teachers union demanded a 21 percent pay raise for its members. The union leader announced that his members would strike if bonuses were given as rewards to individual teachers who actually raised their students’ grades. That would be setting “teacher against teacher.” That would be competition.

Democratic legislators fully supported the socialist union and its selfish demands. Once again Democrat leaders pledged to fight to keep poor, black, and Hispanic children trapped in the failing

schools. At the same time, they sent their own children to expensive private ones. When Al Gore was asked why he opposed school vouchers for black children while sending his own son to a private school, he said: "If I had a child in an inner city school, I would probably be for vouchers too." He said, "Leave my children out of it."

Where is the Republican outrage? Where are the Republican voices exposing this hypocrisy and holding the Democrats to account? Where is the Republican plan to liberate these children and get them an education?

In fact, Republicans do have such a plan. For years, conservatives have been building a movement to reform education and provide adequate schools to poor and minority children. Instead of running the schools on bankrupt socialist principles, these reformers propose to reward teachers and schools that do their job, and hold the others accountable. The main mechanism they propose for school reform is economic choice – putting the education dollar directly in the hands of poor parents. This will force inner city schools to serve their constituents instead of merely exploiting them. It will establish a connection between performance and reward without which no reform can succeed.

But instead of rushing to the barricades with moral indictments of the Democrats who defend the existing system, instead of stigmatizing them as enemies of reform and of the poor, black and Hispanic children who are languishing in them, Republicans do what? They approach the problem timidly and discreetly. They distance themselves from conservative voucher movements and instead make legislative proposals that are modest and "reasonable." They put forward bills that are designed to win over members of the opposition.

But this ignores the reality of the system the Democrats have created, which provides billions of federal dollars to enrich adults and to secure their political loyalty at the expense of children. Democrats will not become "reasonable" until the American people understand what they are doing! The only way this will happen is if Republicans make the Democrats' oppression of poor and minority children the focus of their political attack.

If Republicans do not frame the indictment of Democrats, no one is going to do it for them. They cannot depend on the media to do it. The media is in the hands of the cultural left. This is the

principal reason why Republicans are perceived as lacking compassion (and Democrats are not) and as the party of the rich (while Democrats are not).

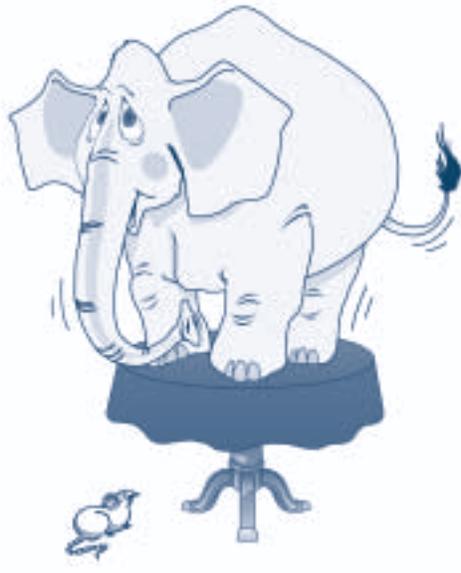
In real life, Democrats are both well-heeled and mean-spirited. Their programs oppress the poor. They have used their power to create public housing slums that are breeding grounds for drugs and crime. They have weakened the criminal justice system, allowing predators to make war on the vulnerable and the poor. And they have destroyed the bottom rungs of the ladder of success for poor, black, and Hispanic children.

But don't expect the

media to tell this story. The successes of the school choice programs that conservatives have created are not going to be trumpeted by left-wing editors and journalists. Instead, they will be spun as failures whenever possible. There will be no press crusades to document the depredations that Democrats have committed on the lives of poor children. No Pulitzer prizes will be awarded for exposing their crimes.

Consequently Republicans must do their own work in indicting the oppressors and promoting an agenda that will liberate the oppressed. To do this,

Democrats systematically ruin young lives, but Republicans are too timid to mention it.



Republicans must come up with a program that is so big that it dramatizes the issues all at once, and the press cannot ignore it.

Congressman Jim Rogan did just that. He devised a plan to spend \$100 billion over 10 years on scholarships for the 12 million poor, black, and Hispanic children in Title I schools. The bill would provide a \$6,800 scholarship (the average public school tuition) for each of these children to enable them to find a school that would teach them. The scholarships would be granted under a formula that restricts them to one-quarter of the students in a given school in any one year. In this way, classroom size would be reduced and spending per pupil increased.

If Republicans were to support such a bill they would frame the issue as it should be framed, change their public image overnight, cast the Democrats as heartless reactionaries, ram them up against the education unions, and drive a wedge the size of Texas through their urban-minority base. 🍌

David Horowitz is a nationally known author and lifelong civil-rights activist. He was one of the founders of the New Left in the 1960s and editor of its largest magazine, *Ramparts*. This essay is reprinted with permission from *How to Beat the Democrats* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2002).



A
Southern Baptist
leader says school choice
frees children from
involuntary servitude
on the education
establishment's
plantation.

By Richard Land

In what promises to be a landmark decision, the Supreme Court stood solidly behind the nation's schoolchildren and stunned the country's powerful public education interests June 27, 2002, by upholding the constitutionality of a school voucher program.

The court held that the voucher choice program serving students in Cleveland, Ohio's, failing

city school system "is neutral in all respects toward religion." This is a great ruling for religious liberty and for America's children.

In *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the Supreme Court decreed 5-4 that when the government gives assistance in the form of vouchers to people who then decide where to use the funds, there is no violation of the Constitution's Establishment Clause.

In establishing the Cleveland voucher choice program, the Ohio legislature said the city's schools were in a state of extreme crisis – a fact validated by a host of statistics that revealed it was *the school system* failing the children and not the other way around.

The Cleveland voucher program provides parents a tuition subsidy up to \$2,250 per child to (1) keep their child in city schools and use the money for a tutor, (2) relocate their child to a successful public school in a surrounding suburban school district, or (3) help defray the expenses of enrolling their child in a private school of their choice.

This ruling is an enormous defeat for the National Education Association, the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and People for the American Way, and a tremendous victory for the children whose hopes for a good education have been revived by the Supreme Court.

In the Cleveland voucher case, the Supreme Court issued an education emancipation proclamation for poor minority children and their parents.

Echoing the freedom Abraham Lincoln provided slaves when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the Supreme Court decision liberates students, primarily African-Americans and other minorities, with vouchers and stakes them to the equivalent of 40 acres and a mule with which to begin life anew in educational freedom.

The 40 acres and a mule promised to freed slaves, but never delivered, is delivered this time through vouchers. Students whom President George W. Bush recently said were "trapped in schools that won't teach and won't change" have been freed from involuntary servitude on the

national education establishment's plantation.

Cleveland's low-income parents are free to do what millions of parents do every year – make the education choice that is best for their children.

This decision will go down as the most important public education Supreme Court decision since 1954, when *Brown v. Board of Education* exploded the myth of “separate but equal” and began the process of desegregating the nation's public schools. The same crisis that drove the *Brown* decision drove the Cleveland voucher decision – millions of African-American children ensnared in grossly inferior schools.

In the aftermath of this latest case, millions of predominantly African-American and Hispanic children in the core of the nation's inner cities, who themselves are the recipients of education opportunities drastically inferior to their counterparts in suburban school districts, will be afforded the opportunity to receive a safe and quality education.

Only one out of ten Cleveland 9th graders was able to pass a basic proficiency exam. Two-thirds of high school students were dropping out before graduation, and the district could not meet even one of the state's 18 standards for minimal performance at the high school level.

Even the four dissenting Supreme Court justices in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* conceded that the record indicates Cleveland city schools are failing, and if anything could excuse vouchers, these schools' record would do it.

I wish I could say that Cleveland was an isolated case, but the academic conditions in this city's schools are typical of too many urban school districts.

Too many of the nation's big-city schools, particularly where the parents are poor and have little leverage over teachers and administrators, are failing to provide an adequate education for the most vulnerable children in our nation.

Throwing money into the public school system is not a fix. There has been a 50 percent increase in inflation-adjusted expenditures per pupil in the last decade in America's schools.

We have increased public education funding, but since 1983 over 13 million children have reached the 12th grade not knowing how to read. Over 27 million children have reached their

senior year unable to do basic math, such as addition and subtraction. These numbers don't include the 30 percent of students who drop out before they reach the 12th grade. We are not getting our money's worth, and we are not the only ones who are getting cheated: It is the students who pay the highest price.

The lower court had held the voucher program unconstitutional, saying it had the unintended effect of promoting religion because over 90 percent of the parents who received the vouchers chose to use them in religiously affiliated schools.

The Supreme Court disagreed, saying the city's voucher choice program passes constitutional muster because aid goes to the beneficiary. It is aid to parents, not schools.

“We also need to give parents more options and choices. Children trapped in failing schools need a way out. They should have a chance at a quality education. That is why President Bush has asked the Supreme Court to take the Cleveland school choice case. He wants the Cleveland school children who have experienced the benefits of private school choice to continue to be given the educational opportunities their new private and parochial schools can offer them. The President is fighting for Cleveland's school children and their parents with courage and conviction. And in the process, he is showing his commitment to school choice. He is showing us that he will work to improve the lives of African-American children. The President believes that school choice and competition can motivate public schools to change and improve.

“In Phillipians, the Apostle Paul says, ‘Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.’ My friends, many of our children are trapped in failing schools. Because of their chains, let us speak for reform courageously and fearlessly. I hope their suffering will inspire us to push for real change of our public schools. We must attack courageously the status quo that has trapped some of our children in failing schools.”

—U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, a member of the Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston, in remarks delivered June 29, 2001, to the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey

The National Education Association will continue to rail against parents having the rights afforded them in voucher choice programs. The general counsel of the NEA promised last year that whatever the Supreme Court ruled, this gargantuan lobby would continue to challenge voucher choice programs on “whatever grounds are available to us from lofty principles to Mickey Mouse procedural issues.”

Until now it has been a debate between lawyers and judges, but the constitutional question has been settled. The focus will move from the Supreme Court to state legislatures, and legislators have a Supreme Court-drafted blueprint for the kind of voucher programs that meet and exceed constitutional requirements and liberate children trapped in failing schools. 🍌

Richard Land is president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. This article first appeared in the September/October 2002 issue of *Light* magazine.



Teachers

could make the kind of money they're worth if they had choices.

By Matthew J. Brouillette

Few people will disagree that Oklahoma's best schoolteachers are often paid less than they deserve. But even fewer people agree when it comes to figuring out what to do about the situation.

Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, suggests simply that salaries for all teachers be raised legislatively to the same level as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. “Low salaries prevent quality people from both entering and staying in the profession,” she argues. Feldman further notes that new college graduates, as well as veteran teachers, are being lured to other professions with lucrative salary offers while the teaching profession languishes.

She's right. But is the answer to attracting and retaining high-quality teachers as simple as increasing salaries? The problem with solutions like Feldman's is that they would require crippling infusions of taxpayer dollars.

There is a better way for teachers to make the kind of money they are worth and even to make teaching, as a profession, attractive enough for top young college graduates to gravitate toward it again. But it will require a complete reorientation of the profession.

Teaching – unlike other white-collar occupations – is one of the few professions where salaries have little or nothing to do with competency, demand, or performance. Public school teachers are paid according to a union-negotiated, one-size-fits-all, seniority-based salary schedule. This means that high-performing teachers are paid the same as mediocre or incompetent teachers.

Pay will become equitable for educators only when the teaching profession becomes competitive like other careers. But first, enterprising



educators must be given opportunities to teach beyond the traditional school setting. In short, they must have choices.

Doctors, lawyers, and engineers can practice their profession in variety of ways. They can be employed by organizations, they can partner with others, or they can work for themselves in private

practice. Schoolteachers lack such essential professional choices.

Traditionally, teachers must enter their profession as employees of schools or school districts. Many qualified teachers leave the profession in order to pursue more autonomous or financially rewarding careers. Other potential teachers never consider entering the profession due to the lack of opportunities for professional development and advancement.

The teaching profession must allow educators the flexibility to work for themselves or the freedom to collaborate with others. They must be able to negotiate their own salaries and establish their own value in the education marketplace.

What if teachers were allowed more professional choices? What would this new education economy look like?

First of all, freeing teachers from seniority-based pay scales would force schools to directly compete with each other to attract and retain good teachers. Administrators would need to provide appropriate financial rewards to teachers who excel or risk losing them to a competing school. Mediocre or incompetent teachers would be forced to improve their skills or choose another line of work. These changes would bring the teaching profession into line with other professional occupations.

Educators with excellent skills also would recognize that, due to their market value outside the traditional school setting, they may be better off going into private practice on their own or partnering with like-minded educators and contracting their services to the highest bidder.

Public school districts have long benefited from contracting out for services like transportation, food services, and building maintenance. Why not contract for instructional services in a similar way? Such opportunities for teachers could create a new breed of “educator-entrepreneur.” This is already happening to some extent in private and charter schools, but the current system by and large smothers or prevents these opportunities from flourishing.

If the best teachers are to earn a salary that more justly reflects their talents and abilities, instead of being paid the same as poorly perform-

ing teachers, then the same incentives that drive continuous improvement and innovation among doctors, lawyers, and engineers must be brought to bear on the teaching profession.

There is no question that increasing teachers’ salaries is key to attracting and retaining more high-quality educators in our schools. But greater freedom and professional choice for teachers, not expensive tax hikes on citizens, is the best way to accomplish that goal. 🍎

Former junior high and high school teacher Matthew J. Brouillette is president of the Commonwealth Foundation and author of the OCPA report “The Case for Choice in Schooling.”

Underprivileged kids deserve access to an education that will help them achieve their dreams.

It is no secret that public education in this country is in trouble,” civil-rights activist Martin Luther King III told OCPA in 1999. “For poor children and children of color the problem of equal access to quality education is magnified. ... America’s educational systems are wholly lacking in preparing our youth for the 21st century, and accordingly, must be born anew.”



Mr. King, who supports tax credits for donations to K-12 scholarship organizations, says we must “increase equal access to private education.”

“Education is the key to freedom and opportunity,” he says. “We basically have one supplier, the public education system, and it has become a huge bureaucracy. This bureaucracy has to be challenged. Fairness demands that every child, not just the rich, has access to an education that will help them achieve their dreams.” 🍎



Value-conscious

taxpayers deserve the best bang for their buck. School choice can deliver.

By David Salisbury

Gov. Brad Henry said in his inaugural address: “Today, we Oklahomans face what many have called the greatest budget crisis in our young state’s history. The dangers are obvious. The opportunities, while less apparent, are far more important.”

Indeed, there is an opportunity in one area of state spending that could both save money and improve services. That area is education.

Since public education accounts for the largest category of state spending in Oklahoma, policy-makers should look for ways to optimize education spending. One way to do that is to give parents a free choice of public or private schools. Since private schools cost less than average per pupil spending in government-run schools, states would save money.

According to the National Center on Education Statistics, per pupil spending in private schools is around \$4,600. Oklahoma per pupil spending is currently \$6,284, according to the state Office of Accountability. So, giving parents a voucher of \$4,600 for each child who switches to a private school would save the state money.

Some states have already started to move in this direction, reducing class sizes and saving on their education budgets. Florida, which allows children with disabilities to attend private or public schools, will save nearly \$8 million dollars this year because of students attending less-expensive private schools. With participation in the program doubling each year, the savings will continue to grow.

Because of the recently adopted constitutional mandate to reduce class sizes in Florida, lawmakers there are considering expanding tuition vouchers and tax credits as a way to reduce the

enrollment and budget burden on the state’s elementary and secondary schools. The number of private schools in Florida has grown from 1,785 in May 2000 to 2,138 this year, demonstrating that new private schools open as demand increases.

Arizona gives tax breaks to residents who contribute to private school scholarship funds. Since the program began five years ago, more than 19,000 students have received scholarships to attend private schools. If the program continues to grow at current rates, by 2015 the scholarship credit will fund 35,000 to 65,000 scholarships every year, saving taxpayers as much as \$100 million annually. Rep. Kevin Calvey (R-Del City) has proposed a similar scholarship tax credit for Oklahoma.

States could also save money by expanding dramatically the number of charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that operate free from the regulations and requirements of the local public school district. According to a recent

“Consider how much worse Oklahoma’s budget crunch would be if private school parents and home schoolers weren’t saving taxpayers a small fortune. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s 1999–2000 private school survey, 31,276 students attend private elementary and secondary schools in Oklahoma. Informed estimates place the number of Oklahoma home schoolers at 14,000 to 25,000.

“So let’s say there are 50,000 Oklahoma schoolchildren whose parents are paying for their education. What would happen if these 50,000 kids showed up at their local public school tomorrow morning? (‘I’m here for my free education, please.’) In order to maintain the current per pupil expenditure of \$6,284 (of which 58 percent is state money, 32 percent local and county, and 10 percent federal), politicians would have to come up with a few hundred million more dollars every year. And that’s not counting construction costs. I’ve seen estimates of \$15,000 to \$35,000 per seat for a child in public school.”

—OCPA research director Brandon Dutcher

survey of the nation's charter schools, the average per pupil cost is \$4,507, significantly less than the \$7,000 average in traditional schools, and charters are forced to use that money to underwrite facilities costs not included in traditional public schools' operating budgets.

Parental demand for charter schools is growing. "On a dollar-for-dollar basis, successful charter schools are outperforming their traditional public school brethren and doing more for students, and that performance is why parental demand is increasing," said Jeanne Allen, director of the Center for Education Reform, which conducted the survey.

An even more radical approach would be to allow communities to opt out of the public school system altogether and just let private schools take care of educating children. The idea isn't so unrealistic as you might think. Maine and Vermont have allowed communities to utilize private schools exclusively for decades. Some of those communities have never even built a public school. In 1995, the citizens of Arrowsic, Maine, voted down an attempt to build a public school. Arrowsic preferred the freedom of being able to select among various private schools.

In Vermont, 17 towns either have no public school or have a school too small to accommodate all local students, and 95 towns have no public high school. Rather than building their own public schools, the state and town combine funds to pay tuition for students at local private schools. Families choose from more than 83 independent schools or utilize public schools in surrounding towns. In 1998, the town of Winhall voted to close its public school and become a "tuition town," sending its students instead to two local private schools.

Tuition vouchers, tuition-tax credits, charter schools, and even total privatization are all viable solutions to Oklahoma's budget squeeze. Rather than cutting basic services and raising taxes, policy-makers should implement school choice programs to save money and improve education. ●

David Salisbury is director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute. For 13 years, he was on the graduate faculty in the College of Education at Florida State University.



Worried public school advocates

need not fret: School choice will strengthen public education.

By Hon. Rod Paige

[The following address, entitled "Strengthening Public Education by Empowering Parents with Choice," was delivered on April 14, 2003, at Harvard University.]

Quite often when I speak, I cover the overall issues surrounding the historic education reforms that President Bush signed into law on January 8, 2002, known as the No Child Left Behind Act. I talk about the President's efforts to get the law passed. And the good progress we're making implementing it in the states.

But as we approach the 20th anniversary of the groundbreaking report *A Nation at Risk* later this month, I am focusing on some of the major issues addressed in the historic reforms of No Child Left Behind.

Fifteen years after *A Nation at Risk* warned that too many children were falling through the cracks in our education system, experts estimated that, of all the high school seniors in the nation:

- 10 million kids couldn't even read at the basic level;
- More than 25 million didn't know even the basics of U.S. history;
- And of all the kids from all high school levels, more than 20 million couldn't even do basic math.

It wasn't for lack of resources or effort.

Between 1970 and 1995, per pupil spending



Rod Paige
U.S. Secretary of Education

shot up 75 percent. The number of students per teacher fell 25 percent. And the number of teachers with advanced degrees more than doubled.

Yet student achievement in the United States remained flat.

I have spent my whole life either studying to get a good education or working to help others do the same. And in my years, I have seen many well-intentioned, well-funded efforts to close the widening achievement gap between those who have and those who don't.

But in all my years, I've never seen any movement with greater potential to improve our education system than the No Child Left Behind Act.

And with each budget cycle since President Bush took office, he has worked to protect our investment in our children – with historic levels of funding targeted to areas of greatest need.

But the question is how do we turn those resources into results? How do we ensure that in another 20 years we're not still a nation at risk?

We do it with a new law that says no child will be left behind. With a new attitude that says every child can learn. And with a new era of accountability that says results matter.

All are strengthening public education in America. I would even argue that No Child Left Behind is the most powerful affirmative action program ever devised. We're working to fix the problem on the front end of each child's education, where it will do the most good.

But improving America's schools will take something else as well: new freedom for innovation and creativity in our public schools – and new freedom for parents to choose what is best for their children academically.

And that's what I'd like to focus on today: Strengthening Public Education by Empowering Parents with Choice.

Tomorrow, here at Harvard, there's going to be a conference discussing innovations in education. One topic I'm sure will be discussed is choice. And

I think it's pretty remarkable. Only in education could we consider choice an innovation.

We are three years into the 21st century – we left behind the Industrial Age long ago. The great companies and organizations that have survived and prospered have done so only to the extent that they provide greater choice to their customers. They have succeeded by providing greater choices and options for the customer.

Yet here we are today – preventing our schools from operating by this same formula for success.

Choice is essential for authentic public school reform, and I'll tell you why: Ours is a highly mobile, confident nation that has the greatest

range of personal choices ever in the history of mankind.

Look at the world we live in. Instant messaging. 24-hour news. Personal Web sites. Global markets. Overnight express. eCommerce.

Every day presents new opportunities to tailor what we see, what we hear, and what we do to our own personal tastes. The world is moving toward more choice, not less. Unless you are poor. In that case, you look around and you see the rest of the country speeding into the

future, while you're still trying to catch up with the present.

Americans will not allow themselves to be boxed in by a monopoly. In the 21st century, choice is not the exception – it's the rule. Only in education would choice and competition be viewed as "innovative" or "radical" or "risky."

Our education system must change to reflect these times – for all parents and all children from all income levels. No Child Left Behind says we must empower parents by giving them the range of choices for their children's schooling that many have come to expect in all other parts of their lives – and that low-income parents can only dream about.

The defenders of the status quo argue the current way of doing business is just fine. That giving parents a choice is a bad idea. That choice

As superintendent in Houston, I embraced choice. I knew that our public school system could compete with charter schools and private schools, and win. And it did.

could destroy the public school system. In fact, some have even claimed that the No Child Left Behind Act is designed to do just that.

I say that's nonsense.

A necessary condition for strengthening public schools is the freedom of parents to choose and participate. This will strengthen public schools – not detract from them.

Under the current monopolistic system, public schools have no incentive to embark on substantial reforms or make major improvements because no matter how badly they perform:

- Their budgets won't be cut;
- Their enrollment won't decline;
- The school won't close down.

But when parents are allowed to remove their children – and the money that comes with them – from failing schools, public schools are forced to respond.

John Gardner found this, when he was president of the Milwaukee School Board. In an article titled "How School Choice Helps Public Schools," John wrote:

"As a left-wing organizer with 30 years' experience in labor unions, workers' cooperatives and poor communities, I knew working-class and poor people do not want school choice or public education. They want BOTH."

"Three years later, evidence from Milwaukee, home of the nation's most ambitious program to let parents enroll students where they want, demonstrates school choice has improved Milwaukee Public Schools."

Under Florida's A-Plus Program, children in failing schools are offered the choice to leave with Opportunity Scholarships or remain in a school that is eligible under the same program for increased funding from the state. The opportunity for students to take their business someplace else is a powerful incentive to improve. If students have choice, schools will begin treating them like customers instead of taking their enrollment for granted.

We have seen – on more than one occasion – how competition created by choice can motivate public schools to improve:

- When philanthropist Virginia Gilder offered vouchers to disadvantaged children at Giffen Elementary School in Albany, New York, 20

percent opted for private schools. In response, Superintendent Lonnie Palmer sprang into action making needed improvements at the public school:

- Hiring a new principal;
- Replacing a fifth of its teachers;
- And adopting a new curriculum.
- Using Department of Education data, Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby studied school choice programs in urban areas. She found that choice increased the academic achievement and graduation rates of students in both public and private schools.

I've heard people say, "There's no room for these children to leave public schools. They must stay where they are, and we'll do the best we can with what we have."

To that I say I believe one of our most grievous sins has been to tie a child to a school that is failing them – and insist that they stay at this school and continue to be crippled. There is room for choice.

The supply of private schools is not fixed. As demand for private schools increases, so too will their supply. Entrepreneurial firms, philanthropic individuals, and even existing schools will establish new schools and many existing private schools will expand.

In the cities with large-scale choice programs, new private schools have been founded directly in response to the demand generated by choice. This is not to say the process is easy. It is not – we are talking about starting a small business – but the number of new schools is growing rapidly.

These include the Hope Academies in Cleveland, more than 20 schools in Milwaukee, and more than a dozen in San Antonio.

School choice turns the static education monopoly into a marketplace that is responsive to consumer demand.

We need only look to the experience of charter schools to see the large number of schools that have been created in response to demand for more and better choices in schooling.

The American people are demanding change:

- More than a half million children are enrolled in roughly 2,700 charters nationwide;
- About 2 million children are home schooled;

-
- The number of students learning through virtual charter schools is growing.

Under No Child Left Behind, if children are not learning, and schools do not improve, then moms and dads can choose supplemental services such as one-on-one tutoring, or after-school help. Or they can enroll their children in a better public school.

The Supreme Court decision declaring vouchers constitutional was great news – and a real step in the right direction for public education.

No Child Left Behind says all parents deserve the right to choose schools for their kids, just like the right to choose their own health care, retirement plans, or family auto. Because all parents, no matter what their color, no matter how rich or poor, understand that education is the key to success.

My parents were educators who drummed that into each of us kids when we were growing up. In my family, we were going to get a good education or die trying. They wanted better for us.

This is what drives Johnietta McGrady, a single mom raising her two children and two of her grandchildren as well. She was so fearful that these kids might follow in the footsteps of her eldest daughter and drop out of school that she sought out a better school with the help of the Cleveland Scholarship Program for low-income families.

She says: “Every day I wake up, I tell the children, today is another day of Thanksgiving.”

Right here in Cambridge, according to a recent article in the *Boston Globe*, a parent named Steve Plante seized the opportunity provided by the law to transfer his four children from a school needing improvement to a new school, the Baldwin School.

The *Globe* quoted Mr. Plante as saying: “The Baldwin is an excellent school, and the kids love it. I’m already seeing a big difference in their grades.”

Competition works and I can speak from experience. I ran the nation’s seventh largest public school system and I didn’t shy away from choice. I embraced choice. I knew that competition would make our system stronger. And it did. And I knew that our public school system could compete with charter schools and private schools, and win. And it did.

I chartered the first KIPP academy in the nation in Houston that takes underachievers and

turns them into scholars. I also launched a program that allowed students to attend private schools in their neighborhood instead of getting bussed all over town to overcrowded public schools.

We strengthened our system in Houston and won a national award for closing the achievement gap. So I know choice can make a difference. And there’s early evidence, thanks to Dr. (Paul) Peterson, that choice programs that allow children to attend private and parochial schools can improve student achievement. The findings were particularly strong for African-American students.

I believe the nation’s public schools are going to succeed by being innovative and entrepreneurial. And we’re here to help.

Four months ago, we launched the new Office of Innovation and Improvement at the Department of Education. Its role is to identify, support and promote promising innovations in education. Through its 25 grant programs and proactive outreach efforts, this office will provide needed resources and ideas to educators across this country. This is a high priority. And that’s why Nina Rees was lured from the White House to lead this endeavor.

Nina has the President’s confidence and mine as well. And she brings to this mission impressive depth and experience necessary to get the job done.

As we work to implement our new education reforms, I am mindful that change can be difficult. But I reminded of the words of Martin Luther King when he said:

“Every society has its protectors of the status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.”

We must break the stranglehold of those whose first concern is protecting the system, not the child – the barnacles that drag down and slow the growth of the improvement of our public schools. Those who do not believe in the strength of our public schools, and have no confidence in our public school educators.

When No Child Left Behind made it the law of the land for schools to tell moms and dads how well their children are learning, a hue and cry

arose from some quarters.

Interestingly, when Congress first debated the merits of what would become the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, another member of the Harvard community, a young Senator named Robert Kennedy, called for standardized testing.

How else, he asked, would we be able to measure the progress of schools and know – and I quote “whether the child, in fact, was gaining from the investment of these funds.”

Senator Kennedy added: “I think it would be very helpful to Congress and I think it would be very helpful to people living in the states, and I think it would be very helpful to the people living in the local communities.”

That’s the point, after all: to ensure that children – not adults, not the system – are gaining from the investment of these funds. And that’s why the robust accountability systems that No Child Left Behind demands, and that fine states like Massachusetts are already adopting, are so critically important.

Strengthening our schools is a mission for President Bush. He believes that educating our children is the most important thing we will ever do as a nation. And each and every one of us must work together as to borrow the President’s words “absolute warriors” on their behalf.

Everyone can help. Volunteer in a local school here in Cambridge, or Boston, or Chelsea. Sign up for Teach for America or Citizen Schools when you graduate. Consider launching a charter school, or preparing to be an urban superintendent – though you’ve got to be a little crazy to do the last one. Be a part of the solution.

The great Barbara Jordan used to say, “We may have come on different ships, but we’re all in the same boat now.”

As passengers on this boat, we need everyone rowing in the same direction.

God bless you all. And God bless America. 🇺🇸

Dr. Rod Paige, the son of public school educators, is the seventh U.S. Secretary of Education and the first African-American to serve in that role. He has been a teacher, a coach, a school board member, a dean of a college school of education, and superintendent of the nation’s seventh largest school district in Houston, Texas.



Generations X, Y, and Z

should get involved in the public arena, and fight for educational freedom.

By Kyle Williams

The idea of having youngsters in the political arena has always been debatable. Do teenagers have the ability to come up with sound opinions? Aren’t the political opinions of young people simply the opinions of influential parents or mentors? Shouldn’t the youth of the nation remain innocent and not become involved in the stressful world?

Getting involved as a young American is sometimes difficult and often discouraged. The United States Congress made up its mind with the campaign finance reform legislation that forbade anyone 17 or younger from donating to a political campaign. Beyond that hindrance, I receive letters all the time telling me to go out, play football, chase girls, and forget about politics.

Then again, I receive words of encouragement constantly from readers of my WorldNetDaily column. Many organizations have been formed that encourage, promote, and organize political movements among the youth of the nation, such as the conservative Young Republican groups across the nation, Teenagers for Republican Victory, and other independent groups.

So, do teenagers have the ability to come up with sound political opinions? Yes, they do. Examples? Well, I’d like to nominate myself. In my mind, I’d like to think that the words I am currently writing are my own opinions that I have come up with. The naysayers will complain that I am brainwashed, regurgitating the words of my

parents, and might even be a diabolical poster boy for an evil right-wing news site.

“A 13-year-old child simply does not possess the life experience, intellectual skills, or moral development to form a lasting and valid opinion about any topic,” they snort.

At what point can you say that an opinion is valid? Eighteen? Twenty? Twenty-five? Thirty? Do you need a college degree? Bachelor’s? Master’s? Doctorate? How many degrees must you have to give an intelligent opinion? At what point in time does the political view of an American become legitimate? “Chronological snobbery,” as C.S. Lewis called it, is soft ground to stand on.

You see, life experience is not the same as intelligence, and lack of life experience doesn’t equal ignorance. For every ignorant teenager, I can give you an ignorant American of considerable age. My old next-door neighbor voted for Bill Clinton because he looked like a nice guy – he was old enough to be considered intelligent, according to some.

Allowing young people to become involved in political thought is something that can bring fresh ideas and new outlooks that are lacking in the world of punditry.

I view our nation at a crossroads in time. To have any meaning, you can have no middle ground at this time. A line has been drawn in the sand. That’s what this book is about; it’s about taking up arms and defending freedom. It’s about morality and the need for true education.

After seeing the state of the public education system, the logical response is a question of alternatives. Are we stuck in this godforsaken system of public education? Absolutely not. Alternative education – that is, an alternative to government schools – has much under its name. Private schools, charter schools, and home schooling are three alternatives to the failing government school system.

American parents are becoming aware of what is happening in our schools, and reform has just now begun to take shape. Greater and greater numbers of responsible American parents are taking their children out of government-controlled schools. The only element that has a chance of saving public education is competition

between private education and public education. So, charter schools, private schools, and all other forms of education like home schooling are a key part of our society’s paths to education because the best way for education to take place is when the parent has many resources and choices at his or her disposal. 🍌

Fourteen-year-old Kyle Williams, a home school student in Guthrie, is the author of the new book *Seen & Heard*, from which this essay is excerpted. His weekly column, “Veritas,” is published by WorldNetDaily.com. When he’s not tackling tough political issues, Kyle likes to play baseball, football, and basketball. He also plays several instruments, including the guitar and piano. Reprinted by permission of Thomas Nelson Publishers from the book entitled *Seen & Heard*, copyright date 2003 by Kyle Williams.

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To that end, OCPA's staff and adjunct scholars (18 college and university professors from around the state) are committed to delivering the highest quality and most reliable research on Oklahoma issues. Through a variety of publications, programs, and public forums, OCPA is helping to improve the quality of life for all Oklahomans by promoting sound solutions to state and local policy questions.

If you would like to learn more about OCPA or to receive a complimentary copy of *Perspective*, our monthly policy journal, please write to us at 100 W. Wilshire Boulevard, Suite C-3, Oklahoma City, OK 73116. You are also invited to visit our Web site at www.ocpathink.org.

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—Charles A. Burris, history teacher, Tulsa Memorial High School

Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, Inc.

100 W. Wilshire, Suite C-3, Oklahoma City, OK 73116

(405) 843-9212 • FAX: (405) 843-9436

www.ocpathink.org • ocpa@ocpathink.org