

January 25, 2001

“Educational Emancipation”

Support for Parental Choice Comes from Across the Political Spectrum

Virginia Walden, single mother and Executive Director of D.C. Parents for School Choice:

“I am a lifelong Democrat, and I am not sure when the Democrats decided that siding with the poor and the needy is no longer part of their platform. School choice empowers parents, and I don’t care who is behind it, Democrats or Republicans.” [Virginia Walden, “Vouchers Deserved a Chance,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1998, p. C8.]

Alveda C. King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“I believe that if Martin Luther King and A. D. King were here they would say ‘Do what’s best for the children.’ It [school vouchers] may sound radical, but so were they.”

“Is it moral to tax families, compel their children’s attendance at schools, and then give no choice between teaching methods, religious or secular education and other matters?”

“The District of Columbia public school system allocates \$10,180 per student, the highest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Yet, according to the Annie Casey Foundation, 80% of fourth-graders in the Washington public schools score below their grade on basic math skills. The National Assessment of Education Progress reports that 72% of Washington’s fourth-graders test below ‘basic proficiency’ . . . [an] appalling failure. . . .

“Washington’s families and teachers favor a right to choose the paths of education for their families. . . . The issue is not what families choose, but rather, that they be allowed and empowered to do so.

"U.S. citizenship guarantees all parents an education for their children. This is a true civil right. Yet some children receive a better education than others due to their parents' abilities to pay for benefits that are often missing in public schools. This inequity is a violation of the civil rights of the parents and children who are so afflicted by lack of income and by the mismanagement endemic to so many of the country's public school systems." [Alveda C. King, "Fighting for School Choice; It's a Civil Right," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 1997.]

Kurt Schmoke, Mayor, Baltimore (D):

"If parents of students have the right to choose so many other basics in their lives — such as where they live, where they go to church, where they work — then they also ought to have the right to choose where their children go to school." [Shawn Donnan, "Schmoke Leaps from One Controversy to Another," *Associated Press*, March 8, 1996.]

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (D-CT):

"The true choice here is between preserving the status quo at all costs, which is slamming a door in the face of the parents and children who want to do better, and doing what is necessary to put those children first. In other words, asking whether the status quo of the public education orthodoxy, which is letting down so many children, is so important that we are willing to sacrifice the hopes and aspirations of thousands of children for the sake of a process, not for the sake of the children." ["District of Columbia Appropriations Act, 1998," *Congressional Record*, September 30, 1997, p. S10195.]

Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-DE):

"I have come to the belief that the constitutional issues involved [with school choice] are not as clear cut as opponents have argued. While lower courts have ruled that vouchers used in private religious schools violate the first amendment's prohibition on the establishment of religion, the Supreme Court has not yet weighed in on the question. In fact, the Supreme Court has ruled that State tuition tax credits for private religious school tuition are perfectly constitutional, and the Supreme Court has ruled that Pell grants — vouchers for college students — can be used in private religious colleges without violating the Constitution. . . . Even some liberal constitutional scholars have noted that vouchers to parents and children may be constitutional.

“Even if vouchers were to take money away from the public schools – and I should point out that not all voucher proposals do – that does not in and of itself mean that public schools will be harmed.

“When you have an area of the country – and most often here we are talking about inner cities – where the public schools are abysmal or dysfunctional or not working and where most of the children have no way out, it is legitimate to ask what would happen to the public schools with increased competition from private schools and what would happen to the quality of education for the children who live there.” [“District of Columbia Appropriations Act,” *Congressional Record*, September 30, 1997, p. S10192.]

Senator John Kerry (D-MA):

“Shame on us for not realizing that there are parents in this country who...support vouchers not because they are enamored with private schools but because they want a choice for their children. They want alternatives, and seeing none in our rigid system, they are willing and some even desperate to look elsewhere.” [“Grand Compromise to Save America's Public Schools,” a speech delivered at Northeastern University, June 16, 1998.]

Senator J. Robert Kerrey (D-NE):

“If I were running a public school system, I'd sign a contract with the parochial schools — as Mayor Guiliani wanted to do in New York — and have them educate some of the poorest kids.

“I don't see the First Amendment as so rigid that it prevents us from contracting with people who are getting the job done right.” [Matthew Robinson, “Is Left Warming to Vouchers?” *Investor's Business Daily*, March 2, 1998, p. A1.]

Representative James P. Moran, Jr. (D-VA):

“I am going to . . . plead with my colleagues on the Democratic side, where the opposition to the bill lies, to set aside the suspect political motivation behind [the Student Opportunity Scholarship Act] and to put aside all that kind of lofty ideological rhetoric that partisanship can inspire. . . . Because all it is is an additional \$7 million that can only go to poor families, only poor families. . . . Why should we condemn all of these children to continue to suffer such inequity because we want to uphold our lofty principles and our traditional politics? Of course we believe in public schools. But we also believe in the intrinsic worth of every one of those children born in the District of Columbia. They have the same

right as everyone else has.” [“District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 1997,” *Congressional Record*, April 30, 1998, p. H26655.]

Representative Floyd Flake (D-NY):

“This is not a question for me about Democrats or Republicans. It is really a question about whether or not we are going to continue to let every child die, arguing that, if we begin to do vouchers, if we do charter schools, what we in fact are doing is taking away from the public system. We say, let them all stay there. Let them all die. It is like saying there has been a plane crash. But because we cannot save every child, we are not going to save any of our children; we let them all die.” [“Consideration of H.R. 2746 and H.R. 2616, U.S. House of Representatives,” *Congressional Record*, 105th Cong., 1st Sess., October 31, 1997.]

“It is unjust to allow those students in failing inner city schools to languish while we wait for the public system to implement their long-awaited reforms. School choice will immediately assist students who currently have no other option but to attend the schools that have failed to properly educate thus far.” [*The School Choice Advocate*, January 1998, p. 5.]

William Raspberry, *Washington Post* columnist:

“Look at it from the viewpoint of those parents who grab so avidly for the chance to get their children into better schools: Should they be required to keep their children in dreadful schools in order to keep those schools from growing even worse? Should they be made to wait until we get around to improving all the public schools? . . . Surely voucher opponents cannot believe the logic of their counterargument: that if you can’t save everybody — whether from a burning apartment house, a sinking ship or a dreadful school system — it’s better not to save anybody at all.” [William Raspberry, “Not Enough Lifeboats,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 1998, p. A19.]

“If I find myself slowly morphing into a supporter of charter schools and vouchers, it isn’t because I harbor any illusions that there’s something magical about these alternatives. It is because I am increasingly doubtful that the public schools can do (or at any rate will do) what is necessary to educate poor minority children.” [William Raspberry, “School Options,” *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1998.]

“My point in the present case, though, is the dead certainty on the part of teachers unions and other liberal groups that vouchers cannot possibly improve education for poor children. It’s almost as though they’d rather be certain than try it — even

in just three or four cities.” [William Raspberry, “School Choice Stonewall,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2000.]

“I’m looking at an October poll done by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a black-oriented think tank. . . The Joint Center survey showed blacks favoring school vouchers, which Bush supports, by a wider margin than the general population – 57 percent to 49 percent.” [William Raspberry, “At the Church of the Democratic Party,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2000.]

Arthur Levine, President, Columbia University Teachers College:

“Throughout my career, I have been an opponent of school voucher programs . . . However, after much soul-searching, I have reluctantly concluded that a limited school voucher program is now essential for the poorest Americans attending the worst public schools. . . . To force children into inadequate schools is to deny them any chance of success. To do so simply on the basis of their parents’ income is a sin.” [Arthur Levine, “Why I’m Reluctantly Backing Vouchers,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 1998.]

Rod Paige, Superintendent, Houston Independent School District [now U.S. Secretary of Education]:

“[A limited voucher program] doesn’t weaken public school systems, it strengthens public school systems.” [Melanie Markley, “Private School Plan OK’d,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1998.]

Milwaukee School District Superintendent Howard Fuller:

“Interests of poor children are best served if they are truly given options, public and private.”

“Real reform will only come from pressure from outside the system, generated by empowered parents with expanded school choice.” [Tony Mauro, “In Wisconsin, ‘School Choice’ Tested,” *USA Today*, August 25, 1995.]

“I believe that our educational systems are essentially organized to protect the interests of those of us who work in these systems, not the needs and interests of the families we are supposed to serve . . . My experience as a superintendent left no doubt in my mind about the impact of the exercise of power on the teaching and learning process. I will argue as long as I have a breath that poor parents must be empowered to have their aspirations for their children’s education taken

seriously by educators. A critical step in that direction is when we give them the capacity to exercise choice." [*The School Choice Advocate*, December 1999, p. 3.]

Polly Williams, Wisconsin State Representative (D):

"Choice is the best thing that has come around for my people since I've been born. It allows poor people to have those choices that all those other people who are fearing it already have." [Donald Lambro, "Parental Choice Called a Must for Education Goals," *The Washington Times*, April 2, 1990.]

Brent Staples, editorial board of *The New York Times*:

"Democrats who had made careers as champions of the poor opposed the [parental choice] plan, arguing that a solution that did not save every child was unacceptable. The Democrats got the worst of the exchange. They seemed more interested in preserving the public school monopoly than in saving at least some children's lives [through vouchers]." [Brent Staples, "Schoolyard Brawl," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1998, Section 4A, p. 35.]

***The Washington Post*:**

"A modest voucher experiment might help energize the public schools. . . . And such a program, we believe, will not do harm to the system or by implication suggest that it is a permanent loser. . . . The point — the hope — would be that such an experiment could be one small part of the effort being undertaken with vigor and optimism by the new school team to bring the District system to a higher, more even standard of achievement, one that reflects the quality of our best schools, which are the models." [Editorial, "The Voucher Issue," *The Washington Post*, September 30, 1997, p. A20.]

Diane Ravitch, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution:

"These [school choice] efforts should be expanded into a national demonstration program involving poor children in no fewer than 10 hard-pressed urban school districts for a period of no less than five years, with carefully designed monitoring and evaluation plans. We cannot afford to write off another generation of urban schoolchildren. . . . It is time to set ideology and politics aside and put our children first." [Diane Ravitch and William Galston, "Scholarships for Inner-City School Kids," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1996.]

Laurence H. Tribe, Harvard Law School:

“Any objection that anyone would have to a voucher program would have to be policy-based and could not rest on legal doctrine. One would have to be awfully clumsy to write voucher legislation that could not pass constitutional scrutiny.... Aid to parents. . . would be constitutional.” [As cited in “Can Vouchers Hurdle Church–State Wall?” *The New York Times*, June 12, 1991.]

Former Milwaukee school choice program evaluator John Witte:

“The official evaluator of the original school choice program in Milwaukee, whose reports have been used by choice opponents to suggest that the program was a failure, is endorsing the program here in a new book set to be released later this month. In the book ‘The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America’s First Voucher Program,’ John Witte said his primary message is that ‘choice can be a useful tool to aid families and educators in inner city and poor communities where education has been a struggle for several generations.’” [Joe Williams, “Ex-Milwaukee Evaluator Endorses School Choice: Opponents of Program Have Used His Earlier Work to Argue It Has Failed,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 9, 2000, p. A1.]

Milwaukee school board member John Gardner:

“My involvement with the Milwaukee Public Schools – as a member of the school board, as a parent and as an active and concerned citizen – has persuaded me that MPS’s internal reforms require the sustained challenge and competition of the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program. The program puts effective pressure on MPS to expand, accelerate and improve reforms long deliberated and too-long postponed.” [John Gardner, at-large member of the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors and member of the NAACP and ACLU, in a 1997 affidavit submitted in defense of the parental choice program for both *Jackson v. Benson* and *Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association v. Benson*, two cases which challenged the constitutionality of the program.]

Albany, New York NAACP President Anne Pope:

“A Brighter Choice [scholarship program] made [school administrators and educators] take a look at what was happening, or not happening, at Giffen, and take actions they may not otherwise have taken.” [James Dao, “How to Make a Poor School Change; A Well-Financed Exodus of Students Is Countered by a Flurry of Fixing,” *The New York Times*, Section B; p. 1; Column 3; Metropolitan Desk, September 29, 1997.]

Urban League of Greater Miami head T. Willard Fair:

“T. Willard Fair, leader of the Urban League of Greater Miami, is opposing a lawsuit against Florida’s new voucher program. The NAACP, on the other hand, is one of the parties suing to stop vouchers. ‘Vouchers allow us to have access to educational opportunity,’ says Mr. Fair. ‘Why should a kid be forced to go to a school where it is obvious that the school is not preparing him or her to be competitive?’ ” [Gail Russell Chaddock, “Vouchers Strain Old Alliance,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 1999, p. 1.]

Andrew Young, former Mayor of Atlanta (D) and former U.N. Ambassador:

“If you’re in an unachieving school, an under-achieving school, then you have a right to seek a voucher to go to a school where you can be guaranteed some level of achievement.” [Bill Cotterell, “Andrew Young Tells Local NAACP That Vouchers Are Good for Schools; He Says the Education Establishment ‘Needs to Be Shaken Up,’ ” *The Tallahassee Democrat*, September 10, 1999.]

“Certain flash points in America’s civil rights struggle represent moments of moral awakening: Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat; John Lewis’ beating at the Edmund Pettus Bridge; Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter from Birmingham jail. By raising long submerged issues into stark and vivid relief, these events forced a reckoning – and reckoned a change. They forced us to reevaluate our beliefs, and, finally, take action.

“This month witnessed another such moment: 1.25 million cries for help voiced by poor, largely minority families, seeking something most Americans take for granted – a decent education for their children. To anyone who cared to listen, this was the loud and clear message sent by those who applied to the Children’s Scholarship Fund to win one of the 40,000 partial, K-8 scholarships we offered to help low-income families send their children to the public, private or parochial school of their choice.

“Until now, the denial crowd could argue: Inner-city families are fairly satisfied with their schools, they assured us, and besides, poor parents are really too out of it to take an active role in their children’s education anyway. The families who sent in 1.25 million applicants from 20,000 communities in all 50 states clearly beg to disagree.

“While scholarships were offered nationally, one-quarter to more than one-third of the eligible population in many urban school districts applied: 26% in Chicago; 29% in New York; 33% in Washington, D.C.; 44% in Baltimore. The most scholarships, 3,750, were handed out to Los Angeles families. New York and Chicago received 2,500 each.

"These families were not asking for handouts, quite the opposite. Despite an average income of less than \$22,000, applicants were asking to contribute on average \$1,000 a year, over four years to supplement the partial scholarship. This represents \$5 billion from families who are financially struggling, and who are already enjoying a public education for 'free.'

"Yet, behind the 40,000 who will be helped loom more than 1 million applicants – and many more who suffer in similar circumstances. What can be done to help them, not five or 10 years from now, when their childhood, their precious chance to learn, is over, but today? Let parents, especially among the poor, seek a decent education wherever it may be found.

"Will allowing parents to choose from different education options 'destroy public education'? Did competition from Toyota 'destroy' General Motors? Has competition from Compaq, Dell and Apple 'destroyed' IBM? Or to use an even closer analogy: Has competition from Federal Express 'destroyed' the government postal service, or has the latter indeed become better, faster, more innovative in response?

"If families were allowed to seek a quality education wherever it may be found, who would benefit? Simple: Those who aren't getting a quality education and those who can deliver it. Certainly, some will oppose competition – just as AT&T once fought the breakup of its monopoly. Others will reflexively resist the redistribution of power to poor families. Still others will wave their worn-out ideologies to defend a system of educational apartheid while demonizing anyone who promotes a parent's right to choose.

"But is this right such a radical proposition? It wasn't to the founders of the United Nations. As stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.' It wasn't to Nelson Mandela, who urged his countrymen to 'defend the rights of African parents to decide the kind of education that shall be given to their children.'

"It is true, that those 1.25 million parents who applied to the Children's Scholarship Fund were probably less concerned with universal rights than immediate needs: gaining access to a good school for their child. But when Rosa Parks refused to take her seat at the back of the bus, she was not thinking of sparking a civil rights crusade, even afterwards; all she sought was an apology from the Montgomery Public Transit Authority. It was for others to see in her small, yet courageous gesture of defiance the universals of human dignity undaunted, of freedom and equality unjustly denied.

"I predict that we will one day look back on the 1.25 million who applied for educational emancipation – for the chance to seek the light and oxygen of a nourishing education – not as victims, but as unwitting heroes with whom a great awakening was begun." [Andrew Young, "Let Parents Choose Their Kids' Schools: Scholarships, or Vouchers, Will Allow Them the Option of Finding a Decent Education," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1999.]

RPC staff contact: Michael F. Cannon, 4-2946

[Sources: Heritage Foundation, Center for Education Reform]