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ABSTRACT

This report suggests that organized opponents of tax-supported school vouchers purposely issue inaccurate statements about parental school choice, suggesting that their widespread efforts seriously contaminate discussion of this policy issue. Section one suggests that a "big lie" strategy is being used by organized school voucher opponents, defining it as the intentional, repetitive issuance of inaccurate claims long after evidence shows them to be untruths, partial truths, and distortions. Section two describes uncritical media reporting of hyperbolic claims that expanding parent options through more school choice poses a threat to basic American institutions. Section three presents a case study of how poor reporting and editorial decisions by the New York Times have misled the general public about school choice research. The paper concludes by looking at the consequences of deception. (SM)



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Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers



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April 2001

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PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT



*Students at Urban Day School,
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*

We argue in this report that organized opponents of tax-supported school vouchers purposely issue inaccurate statements about parental school choice. Their widespread efforts seriously contaminate discussion of this important policy issue.¹

A large number of untrue statements involve the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), America's oldest and largest public voucher plan for low-income families. Many other inaccuracies involve programs in Cleveland and Florida, where tax-supported vouchers are available to low-income students, students with learning disabilities, and students at low-performing schools.

We encourage the print and broadcast media to cast a public spotlight on perpetrators of misinformation about school choice. The news media should hold participants on all sides of the debate accountable for their statements.

Following an **INTRODUCTION**, the report is organized as follows:

SECTION ONE describes the "Big Lie Strategy" of organized school voucher opponents. We define the Big Lie Strategy as the intentional and repetitive issuance of inaccurate claims, long after evidence shows them to be untruths, half-truths, and distortions. The strategy relies on matter-of-fact news reports of false statements. The strategy is abetted greatly when initial news reports are repeated by other media outlets.

SECTION TWO describes increased media reporting of hyperbolic claims, from supposedly reputable sources, that expanding parent options through more school choice poses a threat to basic American institutions. At the same time that such claims are reported by many outlets, the mainstream media have provided scant attention to research suggesting that such claims are irresponsible. These claims often employ the classic strategy of knocking down a straw man, with school choice opponents attacking non-existent school choice programs that have no practical chance of ever being enacted.

SECTION THREE is a case study of how poor reporting and editorial decisions by *The New York Times* have misled the general public about important school choice research.

The phrase "school choice" has numerous meanings. In this paper, the phrase refers exclusively to tax-supported school voucher programs.

**The news media
should hold
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their statements.**

¹ We provide many additional examples to the list of lies, half-truths, and distortions that Howard Fuller identified in a previous report. See Howard Fuller, "The Saturation Campaign of Lies and Distortions About Educational Vouchers," presented at the Second Annual Symposium on Educational Options for African Americans, sponsored by the Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL), Marquette University, March 2-5, 2000.



Shoniqua Ray, Milwaukee
Parental Choice Program

**Brokaw might be
the most prominent
journalist, but he is
hardly the first,
to circulate
inaccurate claims
about existing
school choice
programs.**

INTRODUCTION

Tom Brokaw, anchor of the NBC Nightly News, is a frequent contributor to “Dateline NBC,” which NBC News calls its “signature primetime broadcast.”

During an October 29, 2000 broadcast about the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), Brokaw used his formidable credibility to support a frequent criticism of those who oppose existing school choice programs.

Specifically, Brokaw claimed that private schools may use selective admission policies in choosing MPCP students. As a result, Brokaw asserted that private schools “can pick and choose” MPCP students and thus do “not have to take the kids who are the most expensive to educate.” In contrast, alleged Brokaw, public schools “can’t choose” their students.

Brokaw’s description likely was persuasive to millions of viewers. Yet, as we explain in Section One, he was wrong. His errors could have been avoided through basic research on the MPCP, the law authorizing the program, and the admission policies of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

The truth is essentially the opposite of what Brokaw claimed. In Milwaukee, selective admissions criteria are widespread in public schools, whereas private schools may use no such criteria when it comes to choice students. When private schools are oversubscribed with choice students, they must use a random lottery to admit applicants.

Brokaw might be the most prominent journalist, but he is hardly the first, to circulate inaccurate claims about existing school choice programs.

More than a year before his “Dateline NBC” segment, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* documented the widespread circulation of falsehoods about school choice programs.²

Reacting to the *Journal Sentinel* report, a *Wisconsin State Journal* editorial stated:

“Whether you’re for or against Milwaukee’s school choice voucher program, you’ve got to deplore the lies that opponents are telling — lies that get national attention, and frequently go [uncorrected]...Scrutiny is one thing. Lies are another.”³

While the *Journal Sentinel* and *State Journal* correctly pointed out that public discussion of school choice programs is rife with falsehoods, it is regrettable that few in the media have joined them in reporting or condemning this misinformation campaign. In fact,

² Joe Williams, “School choice attacks often fail accuracy test,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 6, 1999.

³ *Wisconsin State Journal* Editorial Board, “Truth about voucher program,” September 20, 1999.

careless journalism itself, by figures as noteworthy as Brokaw, contributes greatly to the spread of school choice untruths.

Much of this propaganda effort is perpetrated by well-financed interest groups that oppose school choice. These groups do not appear concerned with carrying out an honest dialogue. Their lies, half-truths, and distortions contaminate discussion of an issue that affects educational outcomes and choices for millions of America's most disadvantaged children. Thus, the impact of such misinformation is immense.

When presented with legitimate evidence of errors, opponents of school choice routinely refuse to retract or alter their initial statements. Rather than debate the issue on its truthful merits, they often continue to propagate fear and thus actively prevent a thoughtful, factual discussion of the issue. This creates a climate where more lies, half-truths, and distortions are encouraged.

While perpetrators of lies and innuendo know that they are masking the truth, recipients of the tainted information often do not. Elected officials and the general public are often misled as they seek to determine their opinion about this critical issue.

Information from The Poynter Institute, a training organization for reporters, shows how even a well-regarded journalistic resource can contribute to the spread of untruths about school choice. Poynter describes its mission as follows:

“...to help journalists do their jobs better and to serve their communities [by providing] journalists with reliable information, useful tools, and provocative suggestions...”⁴

At Poynter's website, under “What are school vouchers?,” reporters are directed to four sources:

- The Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), the largest teachers' union in Wisconsin.
- The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second largest national teachers' union.
- The National Education Association (NEA), the largest national teachers' union.
- Public Agenda, an independent public policy organization.

As we will show, the first three of these recommended sources are sponsored by organizations that generate substantial false information about school choice.

Ironically, content at the fourth recommended source, sponsored by Public Agenda, directly illustrates the need for more critical reporting of false statements propounded by the other three.

Specifically, Public Agenda reports that the public knows little about school choice and is in need of more accurate information. Public Agenda warns that:

“[W]hile leadership debate on these issues is thriving, most citizens have only the vaguest notion what terms like ‘voucher’ and ‘charter school’ mean, much less how these ideas might affect their own lives. For most people, these issues are not much more than words in a newspaper headline. ‘Oh yeah,’ focus group participants are wont to say, ‘I saw something about that . . .’”

While perpetrators of lies and innuendo know that they are masking the truth, recipients of the tainted information often do not.

⁴ <http://poynter.org/dj/shedden/020501.htm>.

Our concern is not with honest errors....Rather, our main concern is with known falsehoods, circulated long after evidence reveals them as flat-out wrong.

“The news media have an especially important challenge that won’t be met by recycling partisan slogans or channeling reporters’ energies into meticulous tracking of court battles — assuming that everyone understands what’s really at stake. These issues may not be ‘hard news,’ but journalists must find ways to help the public absorb these ideas and their implications. People need a clear explanation of how these ideas might work, why people support or oppose them, and what the unanticipated consequences might be.”⁵

Media disclosure of inaccurate and misleading statements about school choice is of particular importance, given heightened discussion of such policies following the election of President George Bush.

Our concern is not with honest errors. We do not argue that all misinformation about school choice is intentional. Indeed, an inevitable and healthy part of public discourse involves the process whereby participants correct errors that are brought to their attention.

Rather, our main concern is with known falsehoods, circulated long after evidence reveals them as flat-out wrong. These falsehoods often originate and are spread by organizations with multi-million dollar budgets, organizations that know fact from fiction but ignore the distinction.

⁵ <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/vouchers/voucherintro.htm>.

SECTION ONE: THE BIG LIE STRATEGY



Branda Santos and her sons Michael and Leonardo, Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program

“It’s time to get the truth out” about school choice.

So proclaimed Lu Battaglieri, president of the 147,000-teacher Michigan Education Association (MEA).⁶

Battaglieri often failed to heed his own advice. As one example, he made the completely false claim that when vouchers were tried in Milwaukee, public schools there “lost some 10 percent of their budget, some \$200 million...”⁷

The Associated Press reported this untrue claim as fact. Soon, former First Lady Hillary Clinton repeated a version of Battaglieri’s fiction before a convention of the National Education Association (NEA).⁸ The claim then was included in matter-of-fact national coverage of Ms. Clinton’s remarks. Later, Democratic Party consultant Robert Shrum repeated a similar false claim in a CNN debate with former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson.

The quick journey of Battaglieri’s false statement, from Michigan to Ms. Clinton and on to the national media, epitomizes the “Big Lie Strategy,” aptly explained by author Os Guinness:

“[A] big falsehood repeated over and over is more effective than a small one.”⁹

The Big Lie Strategy requires three elements for “success:” (1) perpetrators willing to misstate facts; (2) reporters who don’t check statements for accuracy; and (3) other reporters, who read initial stories and repeat inaccuracies in their own copy.

The many examples we present are but a small sample. They share common characteristics:

- They are demonstrably false or intentionally misleading.
- They are widely reported.
- The truth rarely catches up. Corrections, if made, are obscure. Freestanding stories about inaccuracies — such as the *Journal Sentinel’s* September 1999 piece — are very rare.

**“[A] big
falsehood
repeated over
and over is more
effective than a
small one.”**

⁶ Battaglieri’s statement appeared on www.mea.org during the campaign preceding the November 7, 2000 Michigan ballot initiative involving school choice.

⁷ Williams, “School choice attacks often fail accuracy test,” 1999.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Os Guinness, *Time for Truth – Living Free in a World of Lies, Hype, & Spin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 119.

- Some reporters legitimize and camouflage false statements by presenting them as a “point of view,” with an opposing “point of view” (often, the facts), offered for “balance.”

The Big Lie Strategy begins in one of two ways.

- Sometimes, attacks on school choice are made where there is no clear evidence — one way or the other — as to their veracity. Here, voucher opponents appear content to cast the policy in a negative light without specific evidence.
- On other occasions, untrue statements are issued in spite of clear evidence that they are inaccurate.

In either case, inaccuracies, half-truths, and distortions become what we call “Big Lies” through sustained repetition, long after evidence shows the statements to be wrong.

Four common examples of Big Lies are that **existing** voucher programs:

1. **Use selective admission practices to “cream” the “best” students.**
2. **Do not serve students with special learning needs.**
3. **Will “destroy” public education.**
4. **Do not improve the academic achievement of voucher students.**

We demonstrate below the inaccuracy of these claims. We describe untruths, half-truths, and distortions that have become Big Lies through sustained repetition, long after evidence shows them to be inaccurate or when no evidence is presented to support their accuracy.

BIG LIE #1: Voucher programs use selective admission practices to “cream” the “best” students.

BIG LIES

“[C]hoice schools [in Milwaukee] are...picking and choosing what children they want [but public schools] cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door.”

Wisconsin State Rep. Christine Sinicki, November 1999, in testimony on Wisconsin Assembly Bill 342

FACTS

Rep. Sinicki made this statement at a public hearing in Milwaukee. As a former member of the Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors, Rep. Sinicki was thoroughly aware at the time of her statement that many individual *public* schools routinely screen students based on academic ability and special education needs. Howard Fuller and George Mitchell have extensively documented this.¹⁰

As for Rep. Sinicki’s claim about choice schools, two months earlier the *Journal Sentinel* article on choice inaccuracies (Note 2) reported: “For the record, no student has formally complained of being denied admission to any [choice] school for [the] kinds of reasons” cited by such choice critics as Rep. Sinicki. We know of no such claims from a parent or family in Ohio or Florida, the other two states with public voucher programs mainly for low-income families.

¹⁰ Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” *Current Education Issues 2000-01*, Marquette University, ITL, January 2000.

BIG LIES

FACTS

"In Milwaukee, thousands of eligible students didn't participate [in the Choice program because]...they couldn't find schools that would accept them. Because, you know, the corollary of parents having choice is that the schools do the selecting of the children. And suburban schools around Milwaukee would not take the children."

AFT President Sandra Feldman, NPR's "Talk of the Nation" on January 8, 2001

Contrary to bogus claims that voucher programs "pick and choose" students, random selection lotteries are required when the number of choice students exceeds available space in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. While the laws vary, they almost completely preclude screening based on ability and special needs.¹¹ This is especially so in comparison to what occurs in many *public* schools. For example, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) routinely screen admission to individual schools based on a student's academic ability, prior behavior records, special education needs, or other factors.¹² This is the case in many large school systems.

In her January 8, 2001 appearance on National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation," AFT President Sandra Feldman perpetuated the blatant lie of selectivity. She boldly, and incorrectly, told host Juan Williams:

"You know, there were lots of private schools [in Milwaukee] that just wouldn't take children, or children started school and ended up getting kicked out."

Feldman gave no proof. She cited no one familiar with the Milwaukee program, including the state's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), as a source. And, as is so often the case, this Big Lie went unchallenged.

Other versions of this Big Lie have circulated for years.

BIG LIES

FACTS

"Vouchers aren't helping the children they were designed to help: students doing poorly in low-performing public schools."

Former North Carolina Gov. James Hunt, 1999

"Voucher[s] siphon the best students from public schools..."

People for the American Way, 1999, www.pfaw.org

As we demonstrate on the following page, state-sponsored evaluations of the Milwaukee and Cleveland programs show that these claims are false.¹³

Further, in Florida's A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, students are eligible for choice only if they attend schools designated as "failing" by the State Department of Education.

Contrary to bogus claims that voucher programs "pick and choose" students, random selection lotteries are required when the number of choice students exceeds available space in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida.

¹¹ "A Comparison — School Vouchers: The Continuing Experiment," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2000. Based on "Tax-Supported K-12 Voucher Programs — Key Legislative Provisions," ITL Office of Research, January 2000.

¹² Fuller and Mitchell, "Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," 2000.

¹³ John Witte, et al., "Fifth Year Report — Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," Department of Political Science and Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995. See www.lafollette.wisc.edu/research/publications/. Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), "An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," February 2000. Kim Metcalf, "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999," September 1999. See www.indiana.edu/~iuice.

“The [Cleveland] scholarship program effectively serves the population of families and children for which it was intended and developed.”

Numerous independent evaluations show these claims to be untrue.

- University of Wisconsin Professor John Witte, DPI’s official evaluator of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) from 1990-1995, found that:

“The demographic profile [of Milwaukee’s program] was quite consistent over each of the [first] five years...[S]tudents who ultimately enrolled...were from very low-income families, considerably below the average [Milwaukee Public Schools — MPS] family and about \$500 below the low-income (free-lunch-eligible) MPS family...Blacks and Hispanics were the primary applicants...both being over represented compared with [MPS]...Choice students were considerably less likely to come from a household in which parents were married...Prior test scores of Choice students [showed they] were achieving considerably less than MPS students and somewhat less than low-income MPS students.”¹⁴

- More recently, Wisconsin’s nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) stated:

“As intended, the [MPCP] appears to be serving children who meet statutory requirements related to low income...In addition, the program serves pupils whose overall ethnic composition is similar to that of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) pupils. In the 1998-99 school year, 62.4 percent of Choice pupils were African-American, and 61.4 percent of MPS pupils were African-American.”¹⁵

- Similarly, Ohio’s official evaluator of the Cleveland program, Kim Metcalf of the Indiana University School of Education, observed that:

“The [Cleveland] scholarship program effectively serves the population of families and children for which it was intended and developed. The program was designed to serve low-income students while maintaining the racial composition of the Cleveland Public Schools...The majority of children who participate in the program are unlikely to have enrolled in a private school without a scholarship.”¹⁶

In addition, Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay Greene provides the following regarding tax-supported and privately-financed voucher programs:

“The average income of families participating in the Milwaukee program was \$10,860. In Cleveland the mean family income was \$18,750. In New York it was \$10,540. In D.C. it was \$17,774 and in Dayton it was \$17,681. In Milwaukee 76% of choice students were in single, female-headed households. In Cleveland the figure was 70%. In D.C. it was 77% and in Dayton it was 76%. The standardized test [scores] of choice students before they began in private school showed that they averaged below the 31st percentile in D.C., and below the 26th percentile in Dayton. In other words, choice students were generally performing in the bottom third academically.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Witte, et al., “Fifth Year Report — Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 1995.

¹⁵ LAB, “An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.

¹⁶ Metcalf, “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999,” 1999.

¹⁷ Jay Greene, “A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know,” prepared for the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, sponsored by the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, March 8-10, 2000, Cambridge, MA.

Such unambiguous facts should be sufficient to counter lies about who participates in school choice programs. However, Big Lies, once sown, often grow deep roots.

Consider the widely reported, wildly inaccurate, and fully uncorrected statement by former North Carolina Governor James Hunt, a visible, media-respected anti-voucher spokesman. Hunt said he “made education the hallmark of his administration.” His efforts earned him the 1999 “Friend of Education” award of the Association of Education Publishers. The June 13, 1999 Sunday edition of *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reported on the award and Governor Hunt’s acceptance remarks, which contained major inaccuracies.

The story, by Andrew Mollison of the Cox Newspapers Washington Bureau, was distributed to 16 daily Cox papers and 650 worldwide subscribing newspapers of The New York Times News Service and they appear on the worldwide web. This wide distribution of Hunt’s remarks, and his failure to correct the errors, illustrates how an uncritical media and a seemingly imperious elected official can legitimize Big Lies about school choice.

Mollison’s story included the following:

“Gov. Jim Hunt of North Carolina...said that instead of helping African-American children find alternatives to poor inner-city schools, most vouchers in an experiment in Milwaukee are being used by parents of ‘suburban white kids who are either already in private school or whose parents wanted them to be there.’”

Three days later, *The [Raleigh] News and Observer* published excerpts of Hunt’s remarks.

The anti-voucher statements attributed to Governor Hunt are false. Specifically:

- As noted earlier, **suburban students are not even eligible for Milwaukee’s choice program.** The program is used solely by children from low-income Milwaukee families, more than 80 per cent of whom are racial and ethnic minorities.
- As we have shown, multiple state studies show that Milwaukee’s (and Cleveland’s) program is serving precisely those students that Governor Hunt claims are not benefiting. The same is true in Florida.

Howard Fuller wrote Governor Hunt, Mr. Mollison, and the editor of the Raleigh paper to seek a correction. The letters were not acknowledged. We are unaware of how many subscribers to the Cox News Service used the original, erroneous Mollison story.

A related half-truth disseminated by school choice opponents is that vouchers are primarily awarded to students already in private schools. Here, opponents of school choice again seek to establish that school choice programs benefit students who don’t need help. The following statement by the AFT is representative:

“State enrollment figures show that, although the program was aimed at allowing public school students to leave low-performing public schools, only about one-third of Milwaukee voucher students came from public schools...”¹⁸

This claim also appeared in a *USA Today* letter to the editor in 1999:

¹⁸ AFT, 1999, www.aft.org.

The anti-voucher statements attributed to Governor Hunt are false... Howard Fuller wrote Governor Hunt, Mr. Mollison, and the editor of the Raleigh paper to seek a correction. The letters were not acknowledged.

“...[I]n the Milwaukee voucher plan, most vouchers appear to have been awarded to parents of students already in private schools.”¹⁹

Such claims are dishonest. By focusing only on the school that students attended in the *immediate preceding year*, students who entered the program from a public school in an earlier year are counted as “already in private schools.” Using this half-truth, most students in Milwaukee’s program will “already” have been in private school. Yet, most of those same students will have transferred to the program from a public school.²⁰

BIG LIE #2: Voucher programs do not serve students with special needs.

BIG LIES

“Private schools are not required to accept special education students.”

AFT President Sandra Feldman, 1998, www.aft.org

“[Disabled] kids...with learning disabilities...kids who have behavioral problems, kids who have been involved with the juvenile criminal justice system. Those kids get left behind [by school vouchers because] a lot of private schools...don’t have to take them, so that leaves it for public education to deal with those children.”

Tammy Johnson, Wisconsin Citizen Action, 1999

“...[I]t’s deeply troubling to see that the schools in the [Milwaukee] voucher program are being permitted to turn their backs on children with special needs.”

People for the American Way, 2000, www.pfaw.org

FACTS

While true of private schools and **many public schools**, this is **not true** and intentionally misleading with respect to students eligible for school choice programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, or Florida.²¹

No private school in Milwaukee may exclude any MPCP-eligible student based on specific education needs. In fact, many students come to the program having been ill-served by MPS. None of MPS’ schools accept all special needs students (see Note 10).

In Florida, the state’s Scholarship Program for Students With Disabilities serves more than 1,000 students with disabilities in 2000-01, its first year.

Under the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, the state of Ohio provides special financial aid for schools that accept learning disabled students. One example, the Hanna Perkins School, serves emotionally disabled, low-income children.

Here, PFAW willfully distorts a Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau report (Note 13), which in fact describes many private choice schools that **do** serve special needs students. The LAB report says there were at least 171 such students in the program in 1998-99.

These Feldman and PFAW statements are classic half-truths.

- While Feldman’s statement is accurate in the abstract, it is highly misleading. She implies that private schools will not accept voucher students with special education needs, but we know of no actual case, cited by voucher opponents or any other source, where such a

¹⁹ Letter to the Editor written by Ed O’Donnell Jr., “School vouchers forget the students left behind,” *USA Today*, October 11, 1999.

²⁰ For example, in 1998-99, there were 6,050 students in the MPCP. Of those who attended school in 1997-98, less than a third were in public school. From this, choice opponents assert that most choice students came from private schools. But a majority of those in private schools in 1997-98 had attended a public school **before 1997-98**. The vast majority of these students transferred to private schools either through the MPCP or the private scholarship program for low-income students known as PAVE.

²¹ Fuller and Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000. Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, “The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools,” *Current Education Issues No. 99-2*, Marquette University, ITL, March 1999.

No private school in Milwaukee may exclude any MPCP-eligible student based on specific education needs.

student in a school choice program has been denied admission to a private school.

- The PFAW statement is a willful distortion of the Wisconsin LAB report, which states only that private schools are “not required” to provide the **same services** as in public schools. In fact, as we already have shown, many individual public schools are very selective. In PFAW’s own words, these public schools are “permitted to turn their backs on” many students with special learning needs. In contrast, as we show, private schools in choice programs have much less flexibility when it come to voucher students with special learning needs.

Predictably, this version of the Big Lie quickly surfaced after President George Bush proposed a voucher plan for low-income children at under-performing public schools.

On January 24, 2001, *Chicago Tribune* reporters Ray Quintanilla and Noreen Ahmed-Ullah stated, with no attribution, that in Milwaukee “...most private or parochial schools will not take children with severe disabilities because the schools do not have the means to offer services.” Such a story is the apex of the Big Lie strategy, with reporters blithely presenting inaccurate information that they apparently accept as fact. We e-mailed Quintanilla regarding this error. We received no response.

Contrary to this inaccurate *Tribune* report, many private schools accepting voucher students offer a range of programs for special needs students. The Lutheran Special School in Milwaukee, which exclusively serves students with special needs, is one of several examples. Another example of vouchers specifically serving special needs students is Florida’s statewide Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities (SPSWD). Students with disabilities who have made inadequate progress at their assigned public school are eligible for the SPSWD. This year, more than 1,000 students are participating. More than 105 private Florida schools have accepted SPSWD students.

Paralleling the lie that voucher schools do not serve special needs students is the claim that “public schools cannot turn away anyone who comes to their door”²² or that “...nearly all public schools offer [special education] services.”²³ Such statements are again false. MPS data show that **none** of its elementary, middle, or high schools accepts **all** students with special education needs.²⁴

A recent *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* headline — “Special-education enrollment not so open” — underscores the fact that individual public schools routinely decline to admit students with special learning needs. Describing an inter-district open enrollment program involving only public schools in Wisconsin, the story cited a “47% denial rate of applications from special education students in the first year of open enrollment...”²⁵

Regarding students with disciplinary problems, voucher opponents again wrongly claim that private schools exclude such students. Wisconsin law does not allow private schools to consider disciplinary history when reviewing voucher applications. In contrast to this open admission requirement for voucher students, MPS has an extensive program of alternative and partnership schools where it unilaterally transfers truants, adjudicated juveniles, and other “at

MPS data show that none of its elementary, middle, or high schools accepts all students with special education needs.

²² Wisconsin Rep. Christine Sinicki, at a public hearing on 1999 AB 342, Milwaukee Area Technical College, November 17, 1999.

²³ www.aft.org, December 1998.

²⁴ Fuller and Mitchell, “Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” 2000.

²⁵ Amy Hetzner, “Special-education enrollment not so open,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 19, 2001.

Existing school choice programs are not destroying “public education” or the vehicle that currently delivers most public education, namely, public schools. In fact, choice programs are a positive spur to public schools.

risk” students. Many of these are private, non-profit schools. Their capacity, as of October 1999, was 3,579 students, or more than 3% of MPS enrollment. The majority of this capacity was in private organizations.²⁶

Fermin Burgos, a former director of MPS alternative programs, said those programs let “MPS...provide a whole range of different options...tailor-made programs for pregnant teens, chronic disrupters, or students coming from juvenile institutions. With [private] contracting, we can offer those programs. In some cases [private schools] are more effective than traditional schools.”²⁷ MPS is not alone among public schools in relying heavily on private schools to educate some of its most difficult students. The practice is widespread.²⁸

BIG LIE #3: Voucher programs will “destroy” public education.

Pollsters document a strong interest among citizens in improving public schools. Voucher opponents exploit this sentiment with unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims that choice might “destroy” public education and “drain” money from public schools.

It is our belief that public education is a concept and that government-owned and government-operated schools represent but one way of delivering public education. As shown at the post-secondary level, there are many ways to provide public education beyond high school. The same is so in grades K-12, where society is choosing an increasing variety of ways to organize schools that deliver “public education.”

We cite evidence showing that existing school choice programs are not destroying “public education” or the vehicle that currently delivers most public education, namely, public schools. In fact, choice programs are a positive spur to public schools. Any contentions of supposed unfair fiscal harm by school choice programs on public school systems is illusory.

BIG LIE

FACTS

“...[T]here is no evidence that” vouchers will make public schools more responsive to parents’ wishes.

Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey, “School Vouchers,” January 24, 2001, Education Policy Project, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education

The evidence shows that existing voucher programs have had a significant and positive impact on public schools.

As we describe in the following pages, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) has responded to the competitive environment created by the school choice program by granting greater school autonomy and gearing the district’s improvement efforts toward parents’ needs and preferences. All these efforts were publicized widely in the weeks and months prior to the Apple and Bracey report.

Further, as we also describe, research in Florida, issued before and after the Apple and Bracey claim, shows that vouchers have spurred statewide improvement in low-performing public schools.

²⁶ Henryette Fisher, “ALT SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AS OF 10/19/99,” MPS Division of Small Community Schools, October 10, 1999.

²⁷ Janet Beales and Thomas Bertonneau, “Do Private Schools Serve Difficult-to-Educate Students?,” Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the Reason Foundation, October 1997.

²⁸ Ibid.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* has reported extensively on this issue.

- A November 15, 2000 story listed several MPS schools that had sought, and received, “more freedom to shape their programs than traditional [public] schools.” The paper explained, “The schools clearly were aiming to reshape themselves to be more appealing in a more competitive school market.”²⁹
- On November 28, 2000, the *Journal Sentinel* cited changes in “the fundamental realities of how many [public] schools operate in Milwaukee.” It described “decisions to make schools more independent, more innovative, more attuned to their communities — and, most of all, more popular with parents in an era where Milwaukee parents have more choices for publicly funded education than perhaps anyone in American history.”³⁰
- A *Journal Sentinel* editorial on January 23, 2001 stated, “Milwaukee’s choice program [has] put pressure on Milwaukee Public Schools to improve.” Further, the paper’s senior education reporter observed, “the spirit of choice is permeating the Milwaukee Public School...[S]chools are trying with once-unthinkable earnestness to win over parents.”³¹

Illustrating the positive new environment, MPS has launched an extensive campaign to encourage parents to choose public schools. The campaign includes radio, newspaper, and TV ads, a 30-minute infomercial about the district, billboards, and district-wide open houses. In a January 12, 2001 interview on Wisconsin Public Television, Milwaukee Superintendent Spence Korte readily agreed that MPS is trying to be competitive:

“Like many other monopolistic operations, you get a little bit complacent when you’re the only game in town...We needed to be able to compete, to really get better, and to be more sensitive to what parents are telling us they need.”³²

Demonstrating the new emphasis on better serving parents and families, Korte stated on a January 10, 2001 radio interview, “We are dedicating ourselves to make sure that public schools know how to reach out and know how to serve families and we’re the logical place for people to start for their educational programs. We hope they’ll give us a good look.”³³

Notwithstanding all the above, Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey blithely say that “no evidence” exists showing that public schools respond positively to school choice.³⁴ Their assertion originally appeared in an error-laced paper posted on the internet by Apple and Bracey on December 1, 2000. On noticing many errors in this publicly issued paper, Kaleem Caire wrote Apple and Bracey, who on January 24, 2001 posted a revised paper containing some corrections.³⁵

Illustrating the positive new environment, MPS has launched an extensive campaign to encourage parents to choose public schools.

²⁹ Alan Borsuk, “MPS panel backs charter, K-8 schools,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 15, 2000.

³⁰ Alan Borsuk, “MPS establishment taking Korte’s cue for sweeping change,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 28, 2000.

³¹ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Editorial Board, “Choices on choice schools,” January 23, 2001. Alan Borsuk, “MPS schools work to woo parents,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 7, 2001.

³² “Weekend,” Wisconsin Public Television, WMVS-TV, Milwaukee, “The School Down the Block,” Anchor Patty Lowe, January 12, 2001.

³³ WTMJ-4 TV (NBC), “Our Lights are On for You,” interview with Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Spence Korte, January 10, 2001.

³⁴ Michael Apple and Gerald Bracey, “School Vouchers,” Education Policy Project, CERAI-00-31, January 24, 2001, www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/edpolicyproject/cerai-00-31.htm.

³⁵ Caire’s letter was sent on December 18, 2000.

**In Florida, the
A+ Opportunity
Scholarship
Program also has
had an important
and positive impact
on public schools.**

Purveyors of school choice Big Lies are loathe to admit error. Thus, the January 24 corrections by Apple and Bracey suggest how completely inaccurate and slipshod their original paper was. The corrections should sound a five-alarm alert to the news media, as Bracey is a widely quoted source of anti-school choice claims.

Apple and Bracey are among a group of openly hostile school choice critics affiliated with the Education Policy Project (EPP), a unit of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation (CERAI). CERAI is directed by Alex Molnar, a widely quoted UW-M education professor. The CERAI website contains a wealth of inaccurate information about school choice. In response to a Wisconsin Open Records Act request, UW-M provided us with information showing that national and local teachers' unions provided more than \$300,000 to the EPP in the last two years.³⁶ The EPP issued the erroneous Apple-Bracey paper.

If choice is destructive of public schools, as opponents claim, consider an October 24, 2000 *USA Today* report on the percentage of fourth grade MPS students scoring at or above proficiency levels on statewide tests. Between 1997-98 and 1999-00, when the choice program grew rapidly, the scores of MPS students *rose substantially*. In 1997-98, fewer than half of fourth graders were proficient in reading, math, science, and social studies. Yet by last year, a majority of MPS fourth graders achieved proficiency in all four categories.³⁷

In Florida, the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program also has had an important and positive impact on public schools. This is true statewide and in Pensacola, the site of the first two schools where students were eligible for vouchers.

According to the former chairwoman of the Escambia County (Pensacola) School Board:

"Before the passage of Gov. Bush's A+ Education plan...many people had never heard of Spencer Bibbs or A.A. Dixon elementary schools...To hear many people tell it, the A+ plan was going to leave our public schools in crumbling ruins. Some teachers and administrators called the program 'dangerous' and 'destructive,' worrying that allowing students to leave failing schools would condemn those schools to continued failure. But they were wrong.

"...[T]he Escambia County School District responded to the threat of competition. Extended reading, math and writing time blocks were instituted at Bibbs and Dixon. Students were offered after-school and Saturday tutoring. A major effort was launched to reduce student absenteeism. And, the community became involved through mentoring and volunteer programs to assist teachers in working with children to increase their performance.

"With the recent return of this year's [state test] scores and new school grades, Escambia County schools have shown nothing but improvement across the board. Last year, nine of our county's schools were given a failing grade by the state. We should be particularly proud that all of them have improved their scores this year...The opportunity scholarship program uses the most persuasive tool we have as an incentive to get schools to perform — money."³⁸

When *The New York Times* visited Spencer Bibbs and A.A. Dixon, it reported that, in

³⁶ Sources of these funds were the National Education Association, its Wisconsin affiliate (the Wisconsin Education Association Council), and the American Federation of Teachers.

³⁷ Tamara Henry and Anthony DeBarros, "Vouchers enter second decade: Milwaukee finds no easy answers in school choice," *USA Today*, October 24, 2000.

³⁸ Cary Stidham, "Gov. Bush's A+ plan proves to be winner for schools," *Pensacola News Journal*, September 5, 2000.

response to the A+OSP, these schools had “hired more teachers, reduced class size, stretched the school year by 30 days and added afternoon tutoring.”³⁹ *Education Week* said, “everyone from the music instructor to the gym teacher [is] helping to teach reading in the morning.” Rita Grandberry, a Pensacola parent who chose to keep her 2nd grader and kindergartner in public school, said: “I see a big change. The environment, the learning structure is better this year.”⁴⁰

In terms of statewide impact, 78 other Florida schools were on the verge of a second “failing” designation for 2000-01. This would have made tens of thousands of additional students at these schools eligible for A+ scholarships. Following widespread efforts to avoid that designation, Florida’s Education Commissioner announced that test scores in all 78 schools had improved enough to avoid the “F” grade.

“All you need to have is the threat of vouchers,” according to University of Florida Professor David Figlio, quoted in *The Tampa Tribune*.⁴¹

The Urban League of Greater Miami hired education writer Carol Innerst to document whether the 78 schools took special steps to avoid a second failing designation. After reviewing documents provided by schools throughout Florida, she reported that the A+OSP “has instilled in the public schools a sense of urgency and zeal for reform not seen in the past, when a school’s failure was rewarded only with more money that reinforced failure.” As one of many examples, she cited Hillsborough County’s Superintendent of Schools, who vowed to take a 5% pay cut — \$8,250 — if any school in his jurisdiction received an “F” grade.⁴²

There is further evidence of the positive impact of school choice on Florida public schools. On February 15, 2001, Florida State University, Harvard University, and the Manhattan Institute released a state-sponsored, independent evaluation of the A+ scholarship program.⁴³

USA Today described the report as the “most comprehensive non-partisan study to date...” The newspaper said it “shows that schools facing vouchers posted larger improvements on standardized test scores than schools that did not face that threat.”⁴⁴ The report itself states:

“The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth. Schools [with] two failing grades from the state during a four-year period have vouchers offered to their students...This report examines whether schools that faced the prospect of having vouchers offered to their students experienced larger improvements in [academic achievement] than other schools. The results show that schools...whose students would have been offered tuition vouchers if they failed... achieved test score gains more than twice as large as those achieved by other schools...[S]chools with failing grades that faced the prospect of vouchers exhibited especially large gains...This report shows that the performance of students on

“The Florida A-Plus Program is a school accountability system with teeth.”

³⁹ Jodi Wilgoren, “Florida’s Vouchers A Spur to 2 Schools Left Behind,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2000.

⁴⁰ Jessica Sandham, “Schools Hit by Vouchers Fight Back,” *Education Week*, September 15, 1999.

⁴¹ George Clowes, “Voucher Threat Improves Florida Public Schools,” *School Reform News*, August 2000.

⁴² Carol Innerst, “Competing to Win: How Florida’s A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform,” published by the Urban League of Greater Miami (305-969-4450) and others, May 2000.

⁴³ Jay Greene, “An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program,” available at http://www.manhattaninstitute.org/html/cr_aplus.htm, February 15, 2001.

⁴⁴ Tamara Henry, “Florida schools shape up amid voucher threat,” *USA Today*, February 16, 2001.

academic tests improves when public schools are faced with the prospect that their students will receive vouchers...”

Another Big Lie is that voucher programs impose unfair financial burdens on public education and require massive budget cuts. These repeated claims of an unfair impact are made despite the fact that choice programs use a “dollars follow student” approach that long has characterized the financing of public education. Further, in the Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida programs, per pupil financial support for most voucher students is substantially less than in public schools.⁴⁵

Another Big Lie is that voucher programs impose unfair financial burdens on public education and require massive budget cuts.

BIG LIES

FACTS

“There is no question about it, the voucher program in the city of Milwaukee is adversely affecting the schools. Class sizes are going up. Programs like art, music, physical education are being reduced. The ability to provide high-level education in technical areas is vanishing. It’s only going to get worse.”

Sam Carmen, executive director, Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association, Colorado Springs Gazette, Feb. 19, 2001.

“In areas where vouchers have been introduced, public schools have had their budgets drastically cut.”

NEA, November 1999, www.nea.org

Milwaukee’s lengthy experience provides the best available evidence that school choice does not impose unfair fiscal consequences on public schools. The October 24, 2000 analysis in *USA Today* shows that from 1990 to 1999, real (inflation-adjusted) MPS spending grew 25%, while enrollment was up 8%. In other words, public school spending grew three times faster than enrollment during the first decade of the Milwaukee voucher program.

The *USA Today* findings confirm an earlier study showing that the overall fiscal condition of MPS schools dramatically improved following enactment of the Milwaukee choice program in 1990.⁴⁶ This is illustrated in the chart on the following page from the study, based on a 10-year analysis of data from the Wisconsin Department of Instruction and the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Evidence shows that in Cleveland as well, the voucher program has not had the negative fiscal impact on public schools that critics claim. The Ohio Department of Education hired KMPG Public Services Consulting to study administrative and fiscal issues involving the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program (CSTP). KMPG reported that the per pupil costs in Cleveland public schools were more than three times that of the CSTP and that the CSTP had not cut state financial support from Cleveland’s public schools.⁴⁷ Notwithstanding such information, Apple and Bracey instead rely on a study published by the anti-voucher AFT when they state, “In the first year of Cleveland’s voucher program, for instance, funding consisted of \$5.25 million taken from Cleveland’s share of state aid.”⁴⁸ That claim, from a source with a poor track record for accuracy, contradicts the more reliable and independent report done for the Ohio Department of Education.

Carmen provides not a single specific example to back up his claim about the supposed budget and program cuts caused by vouchers.

When we asked Jason Helgerson, an MPS budget expert, to comment on Carmen’s statement, he said, “This could not be more wrong.”

Actually, contrary to the claims of Carmen and the NEA, education budgets in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Pensacola have increased significantly. See Note 45.

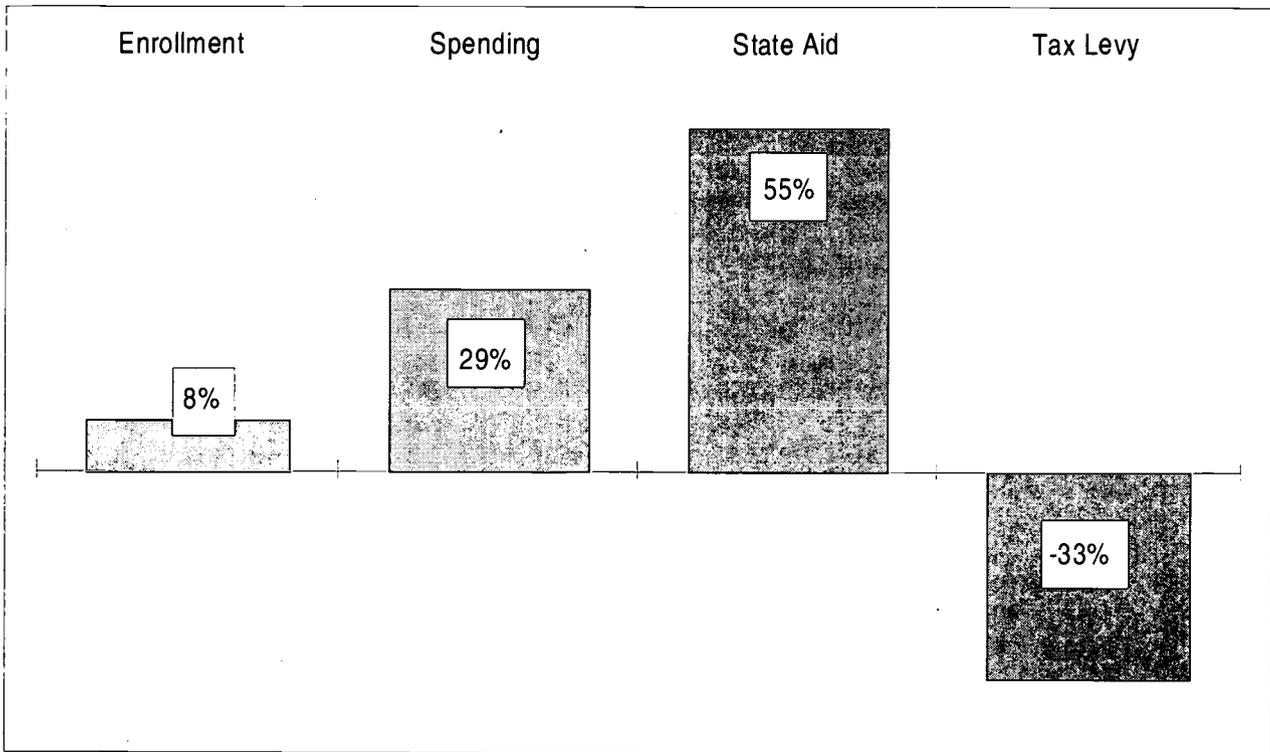
⁴⁵ A description of each program’s fiscal support is found at www.schoolchoiceinfo.org.

⁴⁶ Fuller and Mitchell, “The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools,” 1999.

⁴⁷ “Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Management Study Final Report,” KMPG LLP, Dayton, OH (Phone # 937-259-9850).

⁴⁸ Apple and Bracey, “School Vouchers,” 2001.

Per cent change in enrollment, real spending, state aid, and property taxes, MPS, 1990 - 1999



In Florida, *Education Week* reported that the Escambia County (Florida) school district received additional state financial aid after students in two of its failing schools were designated eligible for vouchers. With these funds the schools hired full-time reading and writing specialists. A voucher opponent, former Escambia County Schools Superintendent Jim May, said, "To be fair, the [Florida] department of education has come through with significant contributions...to help us through a hard time."⁴⁹ This and similar stories flatly contradict the claims by voucher critics of drastic public school budget cuts.

As we have stated, school choice lies often take on a life of their own. Consider the claim by the MEA's Lu Battaglieri, cited at the beginning of this section. He told the Associated Press that public schools in Milwaukee "lost some 10 percent of their budget, some \$200 million" because of school choice. The AP reported this on June 12, 1999, in a lengthy, 1,250-word story by reporter Kathy Barks Hoffman. AP's reporting of this erroneous claim likely have led to its repetition by Ms. Clinton and others. In truth, however:

- Battaglieri overstated by **600 per cent** the actual cost of the MPCP in 1998-99, which was actually \$28.4 million.⁵⁰
- His claim implied a \$2 billion MPS budget, **129 per cent** higher than the actual 1998-99 budget of \$873.4 million.
- Suggestions that the program cost MPS **anything** are debatable, owing to how the state of Wisconsin calculated aid and revenue available to MPS. For example, while MPS enrollment **declined** in 1998-99, the district's overall budget grew, in real terms, by almost \$17 million.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Sandham, "Schools Hit by Vouchers Fight Back," 1999.

⁵⁰ www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dfm/sms/histmem.html.

⁵¹ Fuller and Mitchell, "The Fiscal Impact of School Choice on the Milwaukee Public Schools," 1999.

Though the *Journal Sentinel's* September 1999 article highlighted some of these errors, as did the *Wisconsin State Journal's* September 20, 1999 editorial, neither had much exposure in Michigan, where Battaglieri made his initial remarks.

The net result was a gross misstatement in the Michigan media that was picked up by former First Lady Hillary Clinton and repeated in other national media.

BIG LIE #4: Voucher programs do not improve the academic achievement of voucher students.

BIG LIES

"There is no evidence that vouchers improve student learning. Every serious study of voucher plans concludes that vouchers don't improve student achievement."

NEA, 1999, www.nea.org

"[E]very independent evaluation" of the Cleveland and Milwaukee choice programs says they don't raise student achievement.

AFT President Sandra Feldman, June 2000, letter to Commentary magazine

FACTS

Kim Metcalf of Indiana University, official evaluator of the Cleveland program for the State of Ohio, found statistically significant gains in test scores of voucher students.⁵²

Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du found statistically significant math and reading score gains for Milwaukee voucher students.⁵³

Princeton's Cecilia Rouse found "quite large," statistically significant math gains for Milwaukee choice students.⁵⁴

Section Three describes significant new evidence from privately financed voucher programs in Dayton, Washington, D.C., New York City, and Charlotte.

Presidents of both major teachers unions, Bob Chase of the NEA and Sandra Feldman of the AFT, repeatedly claim that "every serious" or "independent" study of vouchers prove that they do not improve student achievement.

Presidents of both major teachers unions, Bob Chase of the NEA and Sandra Feldman of the AFT, repeatedly claim that "every serious" or "independent" study of vouchers prove that they do not improve student achievement. Other choice opponents mimic their claim. Witness Battaglieri's statement that "the studies show the kids [using the vouchers] aren't doing any better."

Greene comprehensively refuted such claims in a March 2000 paper presented at a Harvard University conference on school choice.⁵⁵ His Harvard paper emphasized that:

All "researchers who have served as evaluators of the publicly-funded choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland as well as the privately-funded programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, New York, and San Antonio agree that these programs have been generally positive developments and have supported their continuation if not expansion. If one only examined the competing interest group and research community spin on the various evaluations instead of reading the evaluations themselves one might easily miss the level of positive

⁵² Metcalf, "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999," 1999.

⁵³ Jay Greene, Paul Peterson, and Jiangtao Du, "Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment," *Education and Urban Society*, February 1999. Greene, et al., "School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment," in *Learning from School Choice*, Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, editors (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁵⁴ Cecilia Rouse, "Private School Vouchers and Student Achievement: An Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1998.

⁵⁵ Greene, "A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know," 2000.

consensus that exists. This positive consensus is all the more remarkable given the politically contentious nature of the issue and the rewards scholars have for highlighting disagreements with one another. [Yet] there is largely agreement among the researchers who have collected and analyzed the flood of new data on school choice that these programs are generally positive in their effects and ought to be continued if not expanded.”

Consider Cleveland, where Metcalf, Ohio’s official evaluator, said that voucher “students in existing private schools had significantly higher test scores than public school students in language (45.0 versus 40.0) and science (40.0 versus 36.0). However, there were no statistically significant differences between these groups on any of the other scores.”⁵⁶

Characteristically undaunted by the facts, nine months later Feldman said, emphasis added, “every independent evaluation” of Cleveland’s program shows no positive impact.⁵⁷ While Feldman, Chase, and others routinely make this same claim about Milwaukee, they know better.

Greene, describing his peer-reviewed⁵⁸ research published by The Brookings Institution and *Education and Urban Society*, says: “In Milwaukee [with Harvard’s Paul Peterson and Jiangtao Du, we] compared the test scores of applicants...accepted to the choice program by lottery to those who were rejected by lottery. We found significant test score gains...after three or four years of participation in the choice program. The...gains were quite large, 11 normal curve equivalent (NCE) points in math and 6 NCE points in reading” after four years.⁵⁹

Greene also cited Princeton’s Rouse, a former staff member of the Clinton Administration’s National Economic Council, whose 1998 Milwaukee analysis appeared in Harvard’s *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. As we note above, Rouse said the math gains among Milwaukee voucher students that she found were “quite large.”⁶⁰

A third study, by UW’s Witte, used different comparisons than presented either by Greene, et al., and Rouse. Witte concluded, “...[T]here is no substantial difference over the life of the program between the Choice and MPS students...On a positive note, estimates for the overall samples, while always below national norms, do not substantially decline as the students enter higher grades. This is not the normal pattern in that usually inner-city student average scores decline relative to national norms in higher grades.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Metcalf, “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999,” 1999.

⁵⁷ Gary Rosen and Critics, “Are School Vouchers the Answer?” *Commentary*, June 2000.

⁵⁸ Peer review of social science research does not put a study’s findings beyond debate, nor does it mean that only one method of analyzing a problem or data is acceptable. This is illustrated by three generally positive, but different, assessments of Milwaukee’s choice program (Witte, 1998, Greene, et al., 1999, and Rouse, 1998). Successful peer review by a respected publisher shows that: (i) the work voluntarily was presented for independent scrutiny; (ii) independent experts provided such scrutiny; and (iii) as a result of such review, including any modifications, the publisher believed the findings warranted publication.

⁵⁹ Greene, et al., “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” 1999.

⁶⁰ Said Greene, Rouse “analyzed the data from Milwaukee and arrived at similar results, at least in math scores. After trying several analytical strategies Rouse concludes: ‘students selected for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program... likely scored 1.5 – 2.3 [NCE] percentile points *per year* in math more than students in the comparison groups.’ Rouse also writes that her findings for math scores are ‘quite similar to those reported by Greene et al.’” Owing to use of a different analytical method of the statistics, Rouse did not find reading gains.

⁶¹ John Witte, “The Milwaukee Voucher Experiment,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Winter 1998.

“We found significant test score gains... after three or four years of participation in the choice program.”

While it may not be possible to prevent vested parties from issuing false statements, a vigilant media can limit their impact and hold perpetrators accountable.

If the generally positive findings of Greene, et al., Rouse, and Witte had involved urban **public** schools, of course Chase, Feldman, Battaglieri, and other choice critics would call them very promising. But, when such results are found at private schools participating in a voucher program, the results show vouchers “have no impact.”

Summary

The Big Lie strategy is apparent in any thorough review of media coverage of school choice. After individuals and organizations persistently circulate a Big Lie, an unquestioning member of the news media eventually reports it. Others in the media spread it.

Among elected officials and average citizens, this strategy likely legitimizes invalid claims that school choice programs:

- Skim the best students;
- Let private schools exclude voucher students with special learning needs;
- Destroy public education; and
- Do not improve student achievement,

The argument contained within a Big Lie will often sound compelling, on face value. But when examined with an understanding of the facts, the argument is revealed as untrue.

While it may not be possible to prevent vested parties from issuing false statements, a vigilant media can limit their impact and hold perpetrators accountable.

SECTION TWO: NORTHERN IRELAND, KOSOVO, SLAVEOWNERS, RACIAL SEGREGATION, AND THREATS TO DEMOCRACY



*Cassandra Galloway and her son
Jonathan, Florida's A+ Opportunity
Scholarship Program*

Increasingly, false and misleading claims about school choice reflect outrageous, even hysterical, bombast. An honest review of these claims shows them to be baseless. Yet, as with Big Lies described in Section One, uncritical news media coverage can confer legitimacy to inflammatory and inaccurate statements.

These outrageous claims often involve erecting and knocking down “straw men,” such as imaginary school choice programs or fringe proposals that have not been enacted and have little chance of being enacted. In this way, voucher opponents avoid the need to debate specific existing programs, where research generally shows a wide range of positive results. If confronted with evidence that their claims are only hypothetical and far-fetched, they have wiggle room to claim that such a program might be enacted at some future point. This disingenuous approach leads the public to believe such programs actually exist or are likely. In so doing, it exploits the general public’s lack of information about school choice.

Balkanization has become a buzzword metaphor for school voucher critics. They use that and other extremist images to divert debate about school choice from factual issues. It is a calculated effort to push citizens’ emotional hot buttons. These inflammatory claims substitute factual information about vouchers with foreboding critiques.

Consider *Time*, which warned darkly in a 1999 headline that “vouchers may be dividing” Cleveland. The evidence? Consider reporter Adam Cohen’s explanation:

“[T]he most troubling aspect of the Cleveland voucher experiment has...everything to do with the danger that vouchers could undermine the role that public schools have played in American life. Public schools have long held the promise of being America’s great equalizer, mixing students of different races, classes, and religions in a single student body...[P]ublic schools have united diverse groups, many of them immigrants, by passing on the nation’s shared civic heritage, from George Washington to George Washington Carver.”⁶²

Here Cohen displays a glaring ignorance of both the history and current reality of public school attendance and integration in America.

- Contrary to his assertion, a simple review of American history shows that for decades, the “common school” was a white, Protestant institution, often unwelcoming to blacks, immigrants, and Catholics. Indeed, the Catholic school system arose as a last resort, after Catholic leaders’ efforts at public persuasion, student boycotts, and lawsuits failed to make public schools more tolerant.⁶³

**Balkanization
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school voucher
critics.**

⁶² Adam Cohen, “A first report card on vouchers,” *Time*, April 19, 1999.

⁶³ David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

- Widely documented racial and economic segregation in American public education is directly at odds with Cohen's blanket claim that "public schools have united diverse groups."⁶⁴

Given these realities, it is both laughable and outrageous for Cohen to suggest that school choice for low-income, mostly minority families in Cleveland is, effectively, un-American.

Further, the news media have paid scant attention to a growing body of important research that draws positive conclusions about the contribution of private schools to important civic values. We summarize several such studies later in this section. The media's failure to report these findings is unfortunate.

Time is far from alone in advancing the notion that school choice is divisive and un-American. Consider this claim, part of the Michigan Education Association's campaign to defeat a November 2000 school choice ballot initiative:

School choice "will fractionalize society.
We don't need to be a Northern Ireland.
We don't need to be a Bosnia."⁶⁵

Such doomsday warnings are more than election-year hyperbole by vested interest groups. Increasingly, they originate from individuals and organizations whose stature suggests they would display a much greater sense of responsibility.

Take, for example, David Berliner, Dean of Education at Arizona State University. He says his school is "rated consistently in the top 30 colleges of education" and has a level of "scholarly productivity [that] far exceeds our reputation." That commitment to scholarship is missing from Berliner's oft-quoted, volatile prediction that:

"Voucher programs would allow for splintering along racial and ethnic lines...
[V]oucher programs could end up resembling the ethnic cleansing occurring
in Kosovo."⁶⁶

This preposterous remark came during the height of legislative debate in New Mexico over a school choice plan. It was matter-of-factly reported under this headline in New Mexico's largest daily newspaper:

"Arizona Dean Warns of Possible Ethnic Splits"⁶⁷

Berliner has many allies in spreading such apocalyptic messages.

For example, Frances Paterson, an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Valdosta State University in Georgia, concluded an analysis of Christian school history and civics textbooks by sounding this alarm: "As we debate the wisdom of various proposals to privatize all or part of American education, we should consider whether such training might increase the Balkanization of our society and lower the

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⁶⁴ Gary Orfield and John T. Yun, "Resegregation in American Schools," The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, June 1999.

⁶⁵ Jason White, "California, Michigan Voters to Decide Voucher Debates," July 28, 2000, www.stateline.org.

⁶⁶ *Albuquerque Journal*, "Arizona Dean Warns of Possible Ethnic Splits," May 8, 1999.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

quality of public discourse by encouraging young people to develop a value system that is based on an us-versus-them world view.”⁶⁸

Playing the “race card”

Some voucher opponents falsely associate existing school choice programs with valid historical examples of programs that fostered racial separation. They do so without providing any actual evidence that the current programs have such an intent or effect. The following examples illustrate this approach. None is substantiated by evidence from existing voucher programs.

- In December 1998, U.S. Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. was a featured speaker at a Milwaukee gathering of school choice opponents sponsored by the People for the American Way and the NAACP. With his voice rising, Jackson said that Milwaukee’s choice program had its roots in “the Deep South.” He linked choice supporters to the “crowd who lost the Civil War.”

Jackson’s histrionics took anti-choice hypocrisy to new heights. He was branding as racist a program that had been introduced in the Wisconsin Legislature by an African-American Representative, Annette “Polly” Williams, a program actively supported by many members of Milwaukee’s African American and Hispanic community. It was also ironic that Jackson condemned a program that gives \$5,326 education vouchers to low-income parents, mostly of color, yet his family, by virtue of its economic ability, sent him to St. Albans High School, an elite, Episcopalian prep school for boys in the District of Columbia.

- Former North Carolina Governor James Hunt, in accepting the “Friend of Education” award (see Section One), equated voucher programs with racial segregation. He claimed, “Vouchers...build up private schools, in effect creating a separate and unequal system.” Picking up on this theme, the lead newspaper story on Hunt’s speech began as follows:

WASHINGTON —...[V]ouchers could speed up the decline of racial integration in public schools, warns Gov. Jim Hunt of North Carolina.⁶⁹

- In the months following reports of Hunt’s statements, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) echoed his alarmist and false message about the impact of choice.
 - “The NAACP has long opposed vouchers that would allow public funds to pay for private school education...[V]ouchers encourage segregation.”⁷⁰
 - NAACP President Mfume, said, “We can’t allow our nation’s schools to be divided once again by skin color...”⁷¹ Here, Mfume both misrepresents the impact of existing voucher programs and seemingly ignores the fact that most urban school systems where there are no voucher programs are racially segregated.

⁶⁸ Frances R. A. Paterson, “Building a Conservative Base: Teaching History and Civics in Voucher-Supported Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2000.

⁶⁹ Andrew Mollison, “Voucher system not good for diversity, report says; North Carolina governor claims danger to school integration,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 13, 1999.

⁷⁰ D. Patterson, “Why We Oppose Vouchers,” *Orlando Times*, November 1999.

⁷¹ Mike Antonucci, The Education Intelligence Agency Communiqué, November 15, 1999, <http://members.aol.com/educintel/eia>.

Some voucher opponents falsely associate existing school choice programs with valid historical examples of programs that fostered racial separation.

**Milwaukee
research and
studies in
Cleveland confirm
that choice
programs in both
cities reduce racial
isolation.**

- Late last year, Alex Molnar's anti-voucher CERAI issued a report by David Berliner and others that contains the following statement:

"Vouchers add another means to segregate our citizens, this time using public money."⁷²

The evidence presents an entirely different picture.

Milwaukee research and studies in Cleveland confirm that choice programs in both cities reduce racial isolation.⁷³ Why? The programs let low-income, mostly minority students enroll in private schools historically attended mostly by white students. Scholars at the University of California-Santa Cruz and the State University of New York also note the potential of choice programs such as in Milwaukee and Cleveland to reduce racial isolation.⁷⁴

A 1999 *Journal Sentinel* editorial said that critics "have argued that [Milwaukee's choice] program would aid white students mainly and, thus, intensify racial isolation among Milwaukee schoolchildren."⁷⁵ However, the editorial said (its emphasis), "...[A] year after the expansion of choice to religious schools, the racial tally is in...[T]he critics are wrong. The program *has* enhanced racial diversity among the city's students."

More recently, *Investor's Business Daily* said, "Critics of school vouchers defend public schools as a source of social integration, warning darkly that private schools breed elite isolation. Have these critics been to Milwaukee recently?" The editorial concluded that, "...[V]ouchers are serving as a catalyst for racial harmony in Milwaukee's schools once beyond the reach of minority parents. How...can those who fret over racial division argue with this?"⁷⁶

This situation is evident in Cleveland as well, where "nearly a fifth...of recipients of a voucher...attend private schools that have a racial composition that resembles the average racial composition of Cleveland...Only 5.2 percent of public school students in the Cleveland metropolitan area are in comparably integrated schools."⁷⁷

⁷² David Berliner, Walter Farrell, Luis Huerta, and Roslyn Mickelson, "Will Vouchers Work for Low-Income Students?" Education Policy Project, CERAI-00-37, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, December 19, 2000. Available at www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/edpolicyproject/cerai-00-37.htm.

⁷³ Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, "The Impact of School Choice of Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools," *Current Education Issues No. 2000-02*, Marquette University, ITL, June 2000. Jay Greene, "The Racial, Economic, and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland," paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management meeting in Washington, D.C., October 1999. Available at www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/papers.htm.

⁷⁴ Robert Fairlie, "Racial Segregation and the Private/Public School Choice," and Hamilton Lankford and James Wyckoff, "Why are Schools Racially Segregated? Implications for School Choice Policies," papers presented at School Choice and Racial Diversity conference at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, co-sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, May 22, 2000.

⁷⁵ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Editorial Board, "Diversity flourishing in choice schools," December 2, 1999.

⁷⁶ *Investor's Business Daily* Editorial Board, "Vouchers Promote Diversity," July 6, 2000.

⁷⁷ Greene, "The Racial, Economic, and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland," 1999. Also Metcalf, "Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999," 1999.

Schools run by Timothy McVeigh or Hamas?

A longtime school choice fearmongerer is John Benson, outgoing Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction. After expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to include religious schools, he called for a “moment of silence.” Benson asked rhetorically: “Will a Timothy McVeigh start the next church in Milwaukee and see this as a profit-making venture and solicit enrollment and succeed? That’s going to happen. There will be some horror stories in the future. You can count on it.”⁷⁸

Years earlier, Mordecai Lee, a former Wisconsin legislator and prominent voucher opponent, asked on national television whether Hamas, which Lee called a pro-Palestinian terrorist group, might be able to open a choice school in Milwaukee. At a meeting where choice supporters sought to respond to such concerns, Lee said the “real support” for school choice came from “Christian triumphalists.”⁷⁹

The Center on Education Policy (CEP), which calls itself the “national, independent advocate for public education and more effective public schools,” is another source suggesting that domestic tranquillity might be at odds with school choice. As part of a discussion about vouchers, CEP starkly warns that:

“The tranquillity of our communities will depend on people being able to reach consensus....Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, Asians, and Native Americans will all need to be tolerant...or we run the risk of great social unrest, political upheaval, and economic decline. Our children, our grandchildren, and our nation will pay a very high price in the years ahead if our country is divided along racial, ethnic, religious, or economic lines.”⁸⁰

Taking a page from Berliner, the Center says:

“The war in Bosnia and other ethnic and religious conflicts around the globe illustrate what can happen when groups of people cannot achieve a common national identity.”

The CEP message is clear: private schools and school choice are an attack on democratic values, values that supposedly can be sustained only by the public schools.

In tactical terms, school choice opponents succeed merely by getting the media to treat such assertions as credible. Recall Public Agenda’s warning that the general public is poorly informed about school choice. Purveyors of threatening claims hide behind a veneer of sincerity to exploit this lack of knowledge. The vagueness of their assertions makes rebuttal difficult. What do those making such charges mean by democracy? What, exactly, about democracy is in danger? How could school choice possibly pose such a threat? Legitimizing such threats is a dishonest way to entice the public to believe that vouchers are a fundamentally bad idea.

Cohen’s 1999 *Time* article shows how a mainstream media outlet can validate such fears. After advancing his thesis about the “danger” of vouchers, he approvingly quotes Princeton

⁷⁸ Daniel Bice and Richard Jones, “Choice Ruling Ushers in New Era,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 11, 1998. Alan Borsuk and Tom Heinen, “Religious Schools Welcome Growth But Are Suspicious of State Interference,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 11, 1998.

⁷⁹ Lee’s reference to Hamas came during a 1995 broadcast of a nationally broadcast morning network news show. His assertion regarding “Christian triumphalists” was made during a private meeting between representatives of Milwaukee’s Jewish community who opposed choice and a range of citizens who supported it.

⁸⁰ “Public Schools: A place where children can learn to get along with others in our diverse society.” Available at www.ctredpol.org.

Purveyors of threatening claims hide behind a veneer of sincerity to exploit this lack of knowledge.

University faculty member Amy Gutman as suggesting that public schools are better than private schools at promoting “tolerance, mutual respect, and nondiscrimination.”

Actual evidence about private schools and civic values

As reported by Cohen, Gutman’s assertion illustrates what Jay Greene calls the claim by “choice skeptics...that private schools will promote intolerance and anti-democratic values.” Greene explains that, according to school choice critics, “[p]ublic schools, by virtue of their public control, are assumed to be more likely to instill...desired civic values in students than are privately-operated schools.”⁸¹

Greene continues by noting that while “[t]heorists, such as...Gutman...make arguments along these lines...they have little to no empirical support for their claims. And while there has been a considerable amount of research developing reliable measures of tolerance in political science, until recently — curiously — no one has examined whether tolerance differs among people educated” in private and public schools.

Following are summaries of several credible studies, dating to 1998, that specifically address the question of whether attending a private school has a negative or positive impact on traditional civic values and tolerance.

Private school attendance fosters civic values

ARTICLE OR STUDY

IMPACT OF ATTENDING A PRIVATE SCHOOL

Teaching Tolerance In Public and Private Schools⁸²

“[T]o the extent that different types of schools affect democratic citizenship, the small differences we observed favor private schools.”

Making Democratic Education Work — Schools, Social Capital, and Civic Education⁸³

“[S]tudents in Catholic schools perform better than students in assigned public schools on all three objectives of a civic education — capacity for civic engagement, political knowledge, and political tolerance.”

A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know⁸⁴

“Rather than being the bastions of intolerance they are sometimes imagined to be, private schools appear to be more successful than public schools at instilling tolerance in their students. And remarkably, this private school advantage appears to last into the adult lives of their students.”

The Effect of Private Education on Political Participation, Social Capital and Tolerance: An Examination of the Latino National Political Survey⁸⁵

“[P]rivate education contributes to higher levels of political participation, social capital and tolerance than does public education.”

“Rather than being the bastions of intolerance they are sometimes imagined to be, private schools appear to be more successful than public schools at instilling tolerance in their students.”

81 Greene, “A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know,” 2000.

82 Kenneth Godwin, Carrie Ausbrooks, and Valerie Martinez, “Teaching Tolerance In Public and Private Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2001.

83 David E. Campbell, “Making Democratic Education Work — Schools, Social Capital, and Civic Education,” paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, Harvard University, March 9-10, 2000.

84 Greene, “A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know,” 2000.

85 Jay P. Greene, Joseph Giammo, and Nicole Mellow, “The Effect of Private Education on Political Participation, Social Capital and Tolerance: An Examination of the Latino National Political Survey,” *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, Fall 1999.

ARTICLE OR STUDY

IMPACT OF ATTENDING A PRIVATE SCHOOL

Integration Where It Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms⁸⁶

"[P]rivate schools tend to offer a more racially integrated environment than do public schools."

Private Schooling and Political Tolerance: Evidence from College Students in Texas.⁸⁷

"[C]ollege students who received a majority of their education at private elementary and secondary schools tend to exhibit higher levels of political tolerance."

We contend that a more vigorous effort by the news media would call attention to these studies and contrast this evidence with the unsubstantiated scare tactics of school choice critics. The pervasive nature of their efforts is illustrated by further examples below.

Will vouchers move America away from "democratic ideals"?

Michael Engel makes this claim when he writes that the "most creative, challenging and inspiring visions of...U.S. public education...have always been rooted in a democratic value system. In that light, it is nothing short of disastrous that more than ever before, one antidemocratic system of ideas — market ideology — almost exclusively defines the terms of educational policies and charts the path of education reform."⁸⁸

Longtime school choice critic Alex Molnar makes similar dire assessments about school choice, saying, "The debate about public education cannot be understood by thinking only about schools. It is part of a much broader struggle: whether America will move in the direction of its democratic ideals, or be further ensnared in the logic of the market."⁸⁹

Molnar's Education Policy Project (EPP), financed largely by teachers union support, issues a steady diet of such rhetoric. For example, Michael Apple, co-author of the error-riddled EPP report described in Section One, said in another EPP report, "Voucher proposals do not stand alone. They are connected to other widespread attacks on public institutions and public employees."⁹⁰ He matter-of-factly claims:

"Voucher plans, like all market-driven and privatized models, are part of a larger and quite aggressive ideological movement to change how we think about our society and our participation in it. They assume without question that public is by definition bad and private is by definition good. Instead of collectively building and rebuilding our institutions, voucher plans are part of the larger effort by conservatives to change the very meaning of citizenship. Citizenship is now to be defined as simply consumer choice. The unattached individual makes choices about her or his life, without caring what its effects are on the rest of society. The reduction of democracy to selfish individualism may in fact be Un-American. I doubt that this is what we as a society want."

Molnar is relentless in pushing such extravagant themes. In a December 2000 publica-

Molnar is relentless in pushing such extravagant themes.

⁸⁶ Jay P. Greene and Nicole Mellow, "Integration Where It Counts: A Study of Racial Integration in Public and Private School Lunchrooms," University of Texas at Austin, paper presented at the meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1998.

⁸⁷ Patrick J. Wolf, Jay P. Greene, Brett Kleitz, and Kristina Thalhammer, "Private Schooling and Political Tolerance: Evidence from College Students in Texas," paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, Harvard University, March 9-10, 2000.

⁸⁸ Michael Engel, *The Struggle for Control of Public Education: Market Ideology vs. Democratic Values* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 184.

⁹⁰ Michael Apple, "Are Vouchers Really Democratic?" Education Policy Project, CERAI-00-08, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, February 2000, www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/edpolicyproject/cerai-00-08.html.

tion issued by his center, the authors wrote, “[Those who offer vouchers]...turn their backs on our goal to build a more democratic society. Instead of subsidizing private schools in a way likely to further fragment society, the world’s richest nation might consider investing in ways to improve low-income communities...”⁹¹

Red herrings

A matter-of-fact and devastating critique of such thinking is found in *School Choice and Social Justice*.⁹² Its author is University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Harry Brighthouse. Brighthouse has a wide reputation for supporting left-of-center political views.

In a chapter aptly titled “Three Red Herrings,” Brighthouse says that the “response of the left [to school choice] has largely been negative.” He discusses “arguments against school choice which have been offered by, usually left-wing, political theorists, all of which are, as we shall see, unsuccessful.”

Regarding the views of Molnar and others, Brighthouse says that placing lofty-sounding theories ahead of “better educational outcomes” will mean *less freedom*. He explains that true freedom is compromised fundamentally when a citizen cannot attain a high quality education. If freedom is equated with democracy, then Brighthouse argues that freedom is best achieved through educational choice. This can incorporate the freedom attained through a citizen’s expanded life options due to better education, or the freedom that low-income parents gain when they have the opportunity to make choices about the schooling options for their children.

School choice — not new at all

Gloom and doom predictions about the possible consequences of school choice reflect an offensive level of intellectual dishonesty. These predictions are often stated as if school choice is experimental and new — something to be feared. Simply put, the only thing new about “school choice” is the struggle of low-income Americans to get it. Middle and upper-income Americans have always had the ability to choose their schools, either through choosing their residence or by affording private education. Only in the sense that it is being extended to low-income families is school choice “new.”

As Richard Elmore and Bruce Fuller state:

“Choice is everywhere in American education. It is manifest in the residential choices made by families [and] in the housing prices found in neighborhoods [and] when families, sometimes at great financial sacrifice, decide to send their children to private school...[I]n all instances, these choices...are strongly shaped by the wealth, ethnicity, and social status of parents and their neighborhoods.”⁹³

More recently, Jeffrey Henig and Stephen Sugarman described the “very considerable degree to which families already select the schools their children attend...[B]y one

⁹¹ David Berliner, et al., “Will Vouchers Work for Low-Income Students?,” December 19, 2000.

⁹² Harry Brighthouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 47.

⁹³ Richard F. Elmore and Bruce Fuller, *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effect of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 187.

Gloom and doom predictions about the possible consequences of school choice reflect an offensive level of intellectual dishonesty.

plausible way of counting, more than half of American families now exercise school choice [and] some families have more choice than others.”⁹⁴

This reality — the pervasiveness of school choice for most Americans — is directly at odds with the dire warnings issued by school choice opponents.

Summary

The claims described in this section rely on emotionally threatening rhetoric and images to warp factual discourse about school choice. A common technique is the use of “straw man” arguments that falsely associate historic or theoretical examples of injustice with existing school choice programs. As with Big Lies listed in Section One, the news media often fail to hold those who issue such claims accountable for misleading the public. In some cases, reporters even legitimize fears that school choice programs create the specter of dividing America and undermining democratic values. Further, we find virtually no evidence that the mainstream media have reported on a growing body of research suggesting that the environment in many private schools is conducive to positive civic values and ideals.

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ness of school
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⁹⁴ Jeffrey R. Henig and Stephen D. Sugarman, “The Nature and Extent of School Choice,” in *School Choice and Social Controversy: Politics, Policy, and Law*, Stephen D. Sugarman and Frank R. Kemerer, editors (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 13.



Karen Ciampini and her daughter Leah,
Florida's Scholarship Program for
Students with Disabilities

**Because of the
Times' stature,
voucher opponents
have eagerly cited
its uncorrected
mistakes.**

SECTION THREE: WHAT *THE NEW YORK TIMES* DID NOT TELL ITS READERS

This section critiques *The New York Times'* coverage last year of important new academic research on school vouchers. Errors included inaccurate and slanted news coverage. On two separate occasions, the *Times* failed to give a reasonable forum for response to scholars who had been attacked in its pages.

On a positive note, many in the news media did not follow the *Times'* lead. Still, because of the *Times'* stature, voucher opponents have eagerly cited its uncorrected mistakes. As a result, an untold number of persons have accepted erroneous information as credible.

Background

In 1998, *The Economist* named Caroline Minter Hoxby one of "the best young economists in the world," a distinction it previously bestowed on influential persons such as Paul Krugman, Lawrence Summers, and Jeffrey Sachs.⁹⁵ *The Economist* recognized Hoxby for her pioneering analysis of "incentives in the education system."

A former Rhodes Scholar, Hoxby is Morris Kahn Associate Professor of Economics at Harvard University. Last year, she was among an elite group of "gifted economists" selected as a Carnegie Scholar. In that role, she is studying ways "to assure that choice-based school reforms, such as vouchers and charter schools, improve racial integration, opportunities for disadvantaged and disabled children, and proficiency in core subjects."⁹⁶

With these and other similar credentials, Hoxby's views on school choice research command attention. A Harvard audience of more than 200 educators, researchers, and reporters listened closely last year as she described a "gold standard" for evaluating voucher programs.⁹⁷ Significantly, given a debate about voucher research that has spanned several years, Hoxby also described a study incorporating the elements of her

⁹⁵ "Journey beyond the stars — The brightest young economists are outgrowing their discipline's traditional boundaries," *The Economist*, December 19, 1998.

⁹⁶ Hoxby's ongoing work has prompted continued praise. According to the January 27, 2001 edition of *The Economist*, among colleagues and within academia at large her research "inspires a kind of awe...for its clarity, its empirical thoroughness, and its wonderful ingenuity in finding ways to answer hard questions."

⁹⁷ Hoxby, "A Gold Standard for Evaluation of Experimental Voucher Programs & Limited Charter School Programs," presentation outline and notes used at the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, sponsored by the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, March 8-10, 2000, Cambridge, MA.

“gold standard.” Specifically, she praised researchers studying voucher programs in Dayton, Ohio, Washington, D.C., and New York City.⁹⁸

The new research

In August 2000, the team praised by Hoxby issued an updated evaluation (the Howell report) of privately financed voucher programs in the three cities.⁹⁹ Media coverage was widespread.

A page one story in *The Washington Post* emphasized the finding of statistically significant test score gains by black voucher students. The story — citing the actual report — noted that the largest gains were in the District of Columbia, followed by Dayton and New York City. The *Post* also reported the study’s findings of no comparable gains among white or Hispanic students.

The Los Angeles Times reported that a “study of three school voucher programs has found that test scores improved among African American children who used vouchers to switch to private schools. But there was no similar improvement among children from other ethnic groups.”

Subsequently, commentators ranging from William Safire to Robert Reich said the Howell report’s findings supported broader experimentation with voucher programs. Several newspaper and magazine editorials expressed a similar view, including *The New Republic* and *USA Today*.¹⁰⁰

The Howell report’s own cautions

Howell, et al., carefully qualified their findings, an approach followed in media appearances as well. When Harvard’s Paul Peterson appeared on *The News Hour* with Jim Lehrer, he summarized the findings in low-key terms, consistent with the report itself. As an illustration, the Howell report states, on page 29:

“One must qualify any generalizations from the results of this pilot program to a large-scale voucher program that would involve all children in a large urban school system. Only a small fraction of low-income students...were offered vouchers...A much larger program could conceivably have quite different program outcomes.”

The Howell report contained several other cautionary passages, similar to those in a separate report (the Myers report¹⁰¹) limited to the New York City data. For example, the Myers report states, on page 11:

⁹⁸ The four are: William Howell (University of Wisconsin-Madison); Patrick Wolf (Georgetown University); and Paul Peterson and David Campbell (Harvard University). Hoxby was a discussant for two papers presented by this team: (i) “School Choice in Washington D.C.: An Evaluation After One Year,” by Patrick J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson and William G. Howell; and (ii) “School Choice in Dayton, Ohio: An Evaluation After One Year,” by William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson. Both available at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/>.

⁹⁹ William G. Howell, Patrick J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell, “Test-Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials,” Harvard University, Program on Education Policy and Governance, August 2000. Available at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/>.

¹⁰⁰ *The New Republic* Editorial Board, “Easy Choice,” September 11, 2000. *USA Today*, “New Insight on Vouchers,” September 18, 2000.

¹⁰¹ With David Myers, David Mayer, and Julia Chou, Howell and Peterson co-authored the NYC report: “School Choice in New York City After Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarships Program,” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. and Harvard University, Program on Education Policy and Governance, August 2000. See <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/>.

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The NEA's concern last year over "good news" regarding vouchers was not limited to the Howell report.

"It is essential to qualify any generalizations from the results of this pilot program to a large-scale voucher program that would involve all children in New York City or other central cities. Only a small fraction of low-income students...were offered scholarships...The impact of a much larger program could conceivably have different program outcomes."

The Howell report evaluated programs in three cities, thus using a more comprehensive data set than the Myers report, which was limited to New York City's program.

Both the Howell and Myers reports contained *identical* overall test score results for New York City voucher students, including groups that showed gains and those that did not.

Attacking the Howell report

Engaging in what some reporters call "voucher wars," NEA President Robert Chase called the Howell report "snake oil [that] glosses over so many facts and runs roughshod over so much context it is surprising any thoughtful people take it seriously."¹⁰²

USA Today called Chase's reaction "knee-jerk." Its editorial board said that voucher "[c]ritics' stubborn refusal to consider [the Howell report] is understandable. They worry that even limited good news will fuel a national push for vouchers."¹⁰³

The NEA's concern last year over "good news" regarding vouchers was not limited to the Howell report. Other reports also were favorable to the concept of school choice. For example, at the Harvard conference (where Hoxby praised Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell), Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow Jay Greene described "incredible progress...in the last several years in developing a solid empirical understanding of the effects of school choice programs."¹⁰⁴

Greene's paper documented ominous news for rigid school choice opponents: "[T]here is largely agreement among the researchers who have collected and analyzed the flood of new data on school choice that these programs are generally positive in their effects and ought to be continued if not expanded."

Greene also discussed "well-publicized disagreements over [school choice] research findings in recent years." Despite publicity about these disagreements, Greene showed that, in fact, "there is a remarkable amount of consensus among the researchers who have collected and analyzed the data from recent programs on the general direction of the effects of school choice."¹⁰⁵ Greene's assessment was buttressed by: findings in several

¹⁰² Bob Chase, "Study glosses over facts," *USA Today*, September 18, 2000.

¹⁰³ *USA Today*, "New Insight on Vouchers," September 18, 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Greene, "A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know," 2000.

¹⁰⁵ As Greene explains: "These researchers largely differ on the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn and the inferences that can reasonably be made for shaping public policy, but they do not differ on their general assessments of the programs they have examined. That is, all of the researchers who have served as evaluators of the publicly-funded choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland as well as the privately-funded programs in Washington, D.C., Dayton, New York, and San Antonio agree that these programs have been generally positive developments and have supported their continuation if not expansion. If one only examined the competing interest group and research community spin on the various evaluations instead of reading the evaluations themselves one might easily miss the level of positive consensus that exists. This positive consensus is all the more remarkable given the politically contentious nature of the issue and the rewards scholars have for highlighting disagreements with one another."

new papers presented at the Harvard conference; the release later in 2000 of the Howell report; and the August 2000 release of a study of voucher students in Charlotte, N.C.¹⁰⁶

The New York Times' flawed coverage of the Howell report

Following extensive national coverage on August 28, the initial *Times* story did not appear until August 29. Under the headline, "Study Finds Higher Test Scores Among Blacks With Vouchers," the *Times* noted that "improvement among black students [in Washington, D.C.] was twice as great as in New York City..." Reporter Edward Wyatt noted that the Howell report "found no significant overall gains among [non-black] students." Overall, the August 29 story was balanced. This approach did not last.

On September 15, a *Times* follow-up story (by Kate Zernike) appeared under the headline, "New Doubt Is Cast on Study That Backs Voucher Efforts." The subheadline added, "Black Youths' Gains Are Called Overstated." Zernike's story was about 50% longer than the August 29 report by Wyatt. Its headline, subheadline, length, content, and tenor strongly hinted at questionable conduct by Harvard's Peterson, one of four members of the Howell report team.

A false claim

The heart of Zernike's story was her claim — which we show to be inaccurate — that David Myers of Mathematica had accused Peterson of "overstating" New York City test scores. Zernike reported that Mathematica, "bothered by what it describes as [Peterson's] exaggerated claims...has taken the unusual step of issuing a statement that cautions against leaping to any policy conclusions." As we have noted, the Howell report in fact contains many such cautions. Zernike's story did not mention this, one of many errors on her part.

On September 16, a day after the Zernike story, George Mitchell (in Milwaukee) and Howard Fuller (in New York City) interviewed Myers (at his Maryland residence) by telephone. With his permission, the call was recorded.

The following excerpt from this conversation and Mathematica's written statement¹⁰⁷ show that neither Myers nor Mathematica named Peterson (nor Howell, Wolf, or Campbell) as having "overstated" or "exaggerated" anything.

Myers: We [at Mathematica want] to be very cautious about saying that in New York City there's an impact [from vouchers]...I want to understand it better before I would make policy about it...That's the gist of the debate here.

Mitchell: But that's not what is being reported...[Do] you believe that Paul has inaccurately represented the [NYC] findings. That's...what the press is...saying. That is the spin. This story [has been] turned from one in which there appears to be substantial agreement to one [which presents] a very harsh view of Paul Peterson's integrity...I'm trying to determine as directly as I can whether you associate yourself with that. Has Paul...can you cite something in his report that is inaccurate? That's my question.

Myers: No...[T]here's nothing...statistically that's inaccurate.

Mitchell: [But] has [Peterson] overstated the policy implications of the NYC findings in any [other] way in the report or in the any other venue that you

¹⁰⁶ Jay Greene, "The Effect of School Choice: An Evaluation of the Charlotte Children's Scholarship Fund Program," Manhattan Institute, August 2000. See http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_12a.htm.

¹⁰⁷ David Myers, "Voucher Claims of Success Are Premature in New York City Second-Year Results Show No Overall Differences in Test Scores Between Those Who Were Offered Vouchers and Those Who Were Not," Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., September 15, 2000.

The heart of Zernike's story was her claim — which we show to be inaccurate — that David Myers of Mathematica had accused Peterson of "overstating" New York City test scores.

**Zernike's
unbalanced and
inaccurate account
suggests a story
reported and
written to fit a
pre-conceived
agenda.**

can cite? Because you have stated [in this conversation] — and again I'm trying to be very precise — [that] these [NYC] results are statistically significant but much more needs to be known before one could argue that [they] should influence policy. Has Paul Peterson said otherwise?

Myers: I don't know. I don't have his report in front of me.

Mitchell: OK, but you don't know that he has?

Myers: Right.

Mitchell: OK...David...[to review] you answered no to the question as to whether [Peterson] said anything inaccurate and that you don't know if elsewhere he may have overstated the impact on public policy. I think that is your belief...?

Myers: Well, right.

Our conversation with Myers occurred a day after Zernike reported that Myers and Mathematica believed Peterson had “exaggerated” claims. Clearly, as the transcribed comments above show, Myers disavowed any such an accusation against Peterson. As for the written Mathematica statement, it names no one as having “exaggerated” anything. Other than through a passive voice headline (“Voucher Claims of Success Are Premature...”) the Mathematica statement itself accuses no one.¹⁰⁸

Zernike's other errors of omission and commission

Zernike declined to respond to our e-mail inquiries about her story. Ethan Bronner, her supervisor, told us that Zernike's story only reflected Myers' concern that the New York City results not be used to “generalize” support for broad findings. However, as we have noted, the Howell report itself emphasized that very point with respect to results from all three cities, a fact Zernike did not report.

In fact, Zernike's story went far beyond the scope claimed by Bronner. Zernike's unbalanced and inaccurate account, described below, suggests a story reported and written to fit a pre-conceived agenda. The actual truth clearly did not warrant the provocative and damaging headlines and story that the *Times* chose to publish. Through errors of omission and commission, she used her position at a leading newspaper to cast Peterson, unfairly, in a false light. Here are examples:

- Zernike omitted the fact that Peterson was only one of four authors of the Howell report. Thus, she withheld from *Times* readers the important fact that the allegation against Peterson would have required collaboration of other researchers at Harvard, Georgetown, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Zernike made no effort to contact Howell, Wolf, or Campbell.
- Zernike omitted any reference to Peterson's peer-reviewed research on Milwaukee's school choice program, including by The Brookings Institution.¹⁰⁹
- Zernike omitted mention of Hoxby's praise for Peterson and his three colleagues for their work on the Dayton-DC-NYC evaluation.

¹⁰⁸ When we asked Myers on September 16 who had made claims of success, he hesitated and then mentioned columns by Safire and Reich. We asked why he did not name them and thus be clear he was not singling out Howell, et al. He did not respond.

¹⁰⁹ Greene, et al., “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” 1999. Greene, et al., “School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment,” 1998.

- Instead, Zernike identified Peterson as being “known within the academic community for his exuberant support of vouchers.”
- Zernike slanted her story with damaging quotes from researchers Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin, without mentioning that they are “known” as *anything but* “exuberant” voucher supporters.
- Zernike omitted information that would have put Levin’s views of Peterson and school choice in context. This would include Levin’s prior research questioning school choice policy.¹¹⁰ It also would have included Levin’s harsh criticism of Peterson earlier in 2000 regarding a study (Greene, et al.) of Milwaukee’s voucher program.¹¹¹ In January 2000, Levin had told Richard Whitmire, then national education reporter for Gannett News Service, of “Peterson’s error” in using inappropriate comparison groups in the Milwaukee study. When Mitchell asked for an explanation of this serious charge, Levin said Greene, et al., was “highly misleading to the point of distorting seriously the actual facts,” a claim that Greene later refuted.¹¹²
- Zernike omitted Carnoy’s affiliation with the Education Policy Project (EPP), a group of academics hostile to school choice policy. As described in Section One, the EPP is attached to the Center for Education Research, Analysis and Innovation (CERAI) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. CERAI is directed by Alex Molnar, who since 1996 has been Peterson’s most persistent and inaccurate critic in the area of school choice research.¹¹³
- Zernike quoted Levin as making the serious and demonstrably inaccurate charge that the release of the Howell report reflected “pressure to get something out at election time.” Levin said that “pressure...was a more dominant theme than the idea of letting it go through review.” Had Zernike pursued Levin’s charge with Howell, Wolf, Peterson, or Campbell, she would have learned, and could have reported, the explanation for its timing: the paper was to be presented in September 2000, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.
- Zernike said the Howell report was “criticized because it had been underwritten by several conservative pro-voucher foundations.” She did not mention that Myers, et al., received financial support from several of the same foundations. Further, if the source of financial support was indeed relevant, Zernike should have mentioned that substantial teachers union financial support underwrites the EPP, with which Carnoy is affiliated. Overall, as Section One explains, the EPP has received more than \$300,000 in the last two years from teachers’ unions, which are groups that lobby extensively against school choice.
- Zernike devoted two small paragraphs in a lengthy story to actual quotes from Peterson. These cast him as indifferent to criticisms that Zernike had elevated to a high level of importance. In seeking Peterson’s comments, Zernike either failed to mention to him all the criticisms she reported or omitted many of his comments. One possibility is that Peterson was not fully aware of the attack that Zernike was about to launch, reflecting what is commonly known among journalists as an “ambush” interview.

Zernike slanted her story with damaging quotes from researchers Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin, without mentioning that they are “known” as *anything but* “exuberant” voucher supporters.

¹¹⁰ For example, Henry M. Levin, “Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Summer 1998.

¹¹¹ Greene, et al., “Effectiveness of School Choice: The Milwaukee Experiment,” 1999, and “School Choice in Milwaukee: A Randomized Experiment,” 1998.

¹¹² Henry Levin, Teachers College, Columbia University, in a March 21, 2000, letter to George Mitchell. In a series of subsequent e-mails to Levin, Greene, et al., refuted Levin’s claim. The correspondence is available by written request from George Mitchell, 2025 N. Summit Avenue, Suite 101, Milwaukee, WI, 53202.

¹¹³ See Howard Fuller, “The Real School Choice Evidence,” *Wisconsin Interest*, Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Fall/Winter 1997.

Three months later, the *Times* published another attack on Peterson and the Howell report.

The *Times* censors Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell

On September 17, having now understood the assault directed at them, Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell submitted a detailed letter defending their work to the editor of the *Times*.¹¹⁴

The *Times* did not publish this letter, which persuasively addressed and rebutted Zernike's suggestions of impropriety.

Zernike's erroneous story heavily relied on her unquestioned acceptance of the idea that Howell, et al., "exaggerated" results by not reporting grade-by-grade test scores. The September 17 letter — the letter effectively censored by the *Times* — contains a powerful rebuttal to this point:

"[N]oted education statistician, Anthony Bryk, together with his colleagues, have recommended that conclusions about school impacts not be drawn from 'only single grade information....Judging a school by looking at only selected grades can be misleading. We would be better off, from a statistical perspective, to average across adjacent grades to develop a more stable estimate of school productivity.'

"Bryk et al.'s admonition is particularly compelling when, as is the case in New York, only 50 to 75 African American students are observed in the treatment and control groups at each grade level. Under these circumstances, the fluctuations from one grade to the next are unlikely to generate what Bryk et al. call 'stable estimates of school productivity.' For this reason, it is premature to conclude from grade-specific information that vouchers had no impact on African Americans, especially when significant, positive effects are observed in Dayton and Washington — and in these cities positive impacts are not concentrated at any particular grade level."¹¹⁵

This view, from a highly respected scholar, supports the decision by Howell, et al., to not report scores on a grade-by-grade basis. It suggests at most merely a *difference of opinion* with the alternative view held by Zernike and Myers. Certainly, this raises serious questions about the propriety of the accusatory headline, subheadline, and Zernike's lengthy September 15 attack on the Howell report. Yet the *Times* refused to even print this portion of the September 17 letter.

Attacked, and censored, again

Three months later, the *Times* published another attack on Peterson and the Howell report. This time, the criticism came from Richard Rothstein, who writes a column on education issues for the *Times*.

Rothstein has been skeptical of school vouchers, and, specifically, of Harvard's Peterson. Rothstein wrote in 1999 that, "Peterson is such an uncompromising advocate of voucher programs that his conclusions are suspect. Voucher

¹¹⁴ Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell, "Letter submitted to the Editor of the New York Times September 17, 2000." Available at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/>.

¹¹⁵ Anthony S. Bryk et al., "Academic Productivity of Chicago Public Elementary Schools: A Technical Report," sponsored by The Consortium on Chicago School Research, March 1998.

experiments...are being driven by powerful political and emotional forces. But evidence is not, and will not likely become, an important factor."¹¹⁶

On December 13, 2000, Rothstein's *Times* column presented a critical commentary of the Howell report. Given Rothstein's prior views, this was not surprising. Nor was it inappropriate; as a columnist, Rothstein has wide professional latitude. Columnists are expected to offer opinions.¹¹⁷

As in September, following Zernike's story, Howell, et al., sent the *Times* a detailed response to the Rothstein column. As in September, *Times*' readers never saw a sentence of this letter.

Summary

The New York Times stands virtually alone among major media outlets in its slanted and incomplete coverage of the Howell report. Yet because it is the *Times*, considered by some to represent *the* standard in journalism, this flawed coverage has given school choice opponents a weapon they willingly misuse. Following Zernike's demonstrable and still uncorrected errors, academic critics of choice, teacher unions, and other organizations opposed to vouchers repeatedly have cited the story as "evidence" that the Howell report is questionable.

Particularly egregious is the *Times*' failure to give Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell an opportunity to respond to the paper's attacks. This imperious conduct disservices the public, which expects balanced, fair, and accurate reporting of the *Times*.

This imperious conduct disservices the public, which expects balanced, fair, and accurate reporting of the *Times*.

¹¹⁶ Richard Rothstein, "Vouchers: The Evidence," *The American Prospect*, November 23, 1999. Rothstein was a participant at the March 2000 Harvard conference where: Hoxby praised Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell; Greene presented his summary of school choice research; and a range of other noted academics presented papers (see Note 83).

¹¹⁷ The column was noteworthy for Rothstein's apparent lack of confidence in his critique. He declined to contact Howell, Wolf, Peterson, or Campbell in advance for comment. He relied instead on a supposedly independent review of the Howell report by Carnoy, a school choice critic affiliated with the teacher union-financed EPP. Rothstein did not share this aspect of Carnoy's background with his readers. He declined to respond when we asked him why he did not contact Howell, et al., for comment or why he did not present Carnoy's credentials.



*Eulanda Johnson and her daughter Ebony,
Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program*

We contend that a major reason for the containment of school choice to middle income and upper income parents is the sustained campaign of lies and distortion described in this report.

CONCLUSION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF DECEPTION

Educator and philosopher Sissela Bok is a leading commentator on issues involving public ethics. In an important 1978 book, she persuasively argues that the stakes of dishonesty are very high.¹¹⁸ Through an extensive discussion of historic examples — including the then-recent experience of Watergate and the Vietnam War — she convincingly asserts that “deceit and violence” are “two forms of deliberate assault on human beings” and their society.

Bok is especially effective in describing the myriad rationalizations used by liars to justify their deception. She urges readers to “assume the perspective of the deceived,” especially “those who experience the consequences of...deception.”¹¹⁹ Nowhere is such advice more valid than in the environment of deception regarding school choice. There, in assuming the perspective of the deceived, we must consider millions of low-income children, mostly of color, who have failed to achieve their full academic potential in a system with few educational options.

In a 1997 presentation to a Brookings Institution conference, Professor Lawrence C. Stedman said that:

“...[Twelfth] grade black students are performing at the level of middle school white students. These students are about to graduate, yet they lag four or more years behind in every area [including] reading, math, science, writing, history, and geography. Latino seniors do somewhat better...in math and writing but, in the other areas, are also four years behind white 12th graders...[R]acial gaps in achievement...are as large or larger than they were a decade ago...The conclusion is distressing but unavoidable...[A] generation has passed and the achievement of educational equality remains an elusive dream. Schools and society remain divided into two different worlds, one black and one white, separate and unequal.”¹²⁰

A growing range of credible research suggests that expanded school choice may hold real promise for addressing the unacceptable conditions described by Stedman. Yet, school choice is not a meaningful option for millions of low-income parents and their children. We contend that a major reason for the containment of school choice to middle income and upper income parents is the sustained campaign of lies and distortion described in this report.

¹¹⁸ Sissela Bok, *Lying — Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1978).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹²⁰ Lawrence C. Stedman, “An Assessment of the Contemporary Debate Over U.S. Achievement,” April 16, 1997 draft, presented in May 1997 at The Brookings Institution. Stedman is a professor in the School of Education and Human Development, State University of New York at Binghamton.

This campaign of misinformation contributes to denying low-income parents and their children the options that most American families take for granted. **That result, and not school choice, is un-American. In this instance, the “consequences of deception” are measured by millions of children whose ability to prosper in a free society may be jeopardized.**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Howard L. Fuller, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Professor of Education and Founder/Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL) at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Immediately before his appointment at Marquette University, Dr. Fuller served as Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools from June 1991 through June 1995. Dr. Fuller is President of the national Board of Directors of the Black Alliance for Educational Options.



Kaleem Caire is Executive Director of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). From 1997 to 1999, Caire was the chief education consultant on Minority Student Achievement at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. In 2000, he received the Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award from the City of Madison (WI). Caire holds a Bachelor's Degree in Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Abigail Winger, Deborah Meyer, Sharon Schmeling, and George A. Mitchell assisted in preparing this report. They are consulting research associates with the ITL Office of Research.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF LEARNING

Dr. Fuller founded the Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL) in 1995. Its mission is to create and support educational initiatives that transform learning and provide families, particularly low-income families, with both exemplary options and the power to choose the most appropriate option for their children.

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ABOUT THE BLACK ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

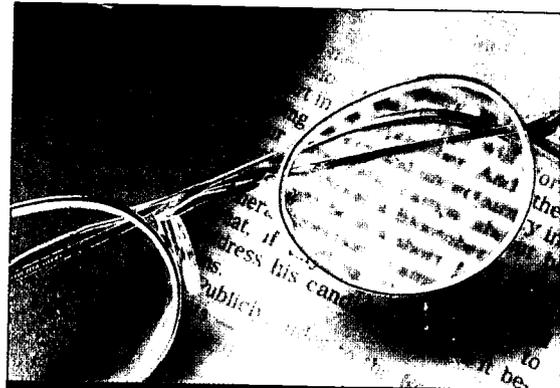
Founded in 1999, the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is a national organization whose mission is to actively and aggressively support parent choice to empower families and increase educational options for Black children. BAEO supports a variety of options for these parents, including: vouchers; scholarships to private schools; tuition tax credits; charter schools; home schooling; public/private partnerships; and innovations in existing public schools.

On March 1-4, 2001, more than 700 parents, religious leaders, educators, community activists, and elected officials attended BAEO's national Symposium on Educational Options for African Americans.

Beginning in the fall of 2000, BAEO has sponsored a public information campaign to raise awareness about the need for and value of expanded educational options. This campaign includes a continuing series of print ads in *The Washington Post* and *The New Republic*. This campaign also incorporates television and radio ads in the greater Washington, D.C., area.

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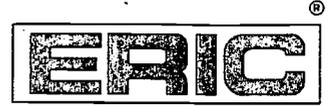
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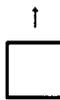
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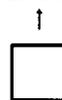
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