

Doing School Choice Right

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on Communities and Choice

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“This isn’t about whether school choice is a good idea. It’s about how you do it. If you are in a community where choice is a reality, how do you make it work — for children, families, communities? For those who exercise choice? And for those who don’t? Assuming choice is here to stay, if a community wants to begin, how does it do it well?”

PAUL T. HILL, DIRECTOR, CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Introduction

How can communities encourage the development of good school alternatives harnessed to solid public oversight? Do charter or voucher schools face particular accountability challenges? What do parents need if they are to make sound choices? In particular, what do the poorest parents need? How do advocates of more school choice deal with the politics surrounding the issue? And, how do schools of choice make sure they get all the funds to which they are entitled, including special education funds?

These questions and others lay at the heart of a two-day seminar on “How Can Communities Do School Choice Right?” convened at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., in August 2004. The seminar, hosted by the Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings and the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington’s Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs, took dead aim at the practical challenges involved in a choice movement that now involves tens of thousands of schools and millions of students across the United States.

Drawing together some 100 parents, researchers, and community leaders, the seminar asked the participants to explore the challenges posed in the 2003 report of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education, *School Choice: Doing it the Right Way Makes a Difference*. The format was simple. The seminar was built around presentations by eight school and community activists, each able to draw on practical experience with implementing school choice programs at the community level (see appendices). Following each presentation, participants offered their own observations.

These proceedings capture the flavor of the conversation.

Doing School Choice Right

“Whether or not one accepts the wisdom and desirability of ‘choice’ in K-12 education, the recent growth of alternative schools, charter schools, home schooling, educational options via the Internet, and judicial acceptance of vouchers has dramatically expanded the options available to American parents for the education of their children,” noted the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education in its 2003 report, *School Choice: Doing it the Right Way Makes a Difference*. School choice in some form is here to stay, concluded the commission, and is likely to expand in the future.

Indeed, the commission’s analysis sketched a massive transformation of public education over the last ten years. School options have increased to the point that more than 600,000 students are enrolled in “alternative schools;” 850,000 students are being home-schooled; 35 states now support “magnet schools;” more than 40 states support nearly 3,000 charter schools enrolling more than half a million students; and state-funded voucher programs exist in six states. In many ways, the argument about choice has been settled. Today’s public education system provides a large and growing array of options for publicly-supported education across the country.

Against that backdrop, the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center and the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education convened a working seminar to explore how to implement choice programs well. In launching the meeting, Paul T. Hill, Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, noted, “This isn’t about whether school choice is a good idea. It’s about how you do it. Assuming choice is here to stay, if a community wants to begin, how does it do it well?”

Four key questions framed the discussion. They were how to:

- encourage the development of good schools with fair public oversight;
- provide information to parents and manage student admissions;
- manage the politics of the school choice movement; and
- ensure that schools of choice receive all the funds to which they’re entitled.

Encouraging the Development of Good Schools and Fair Public Oversight

When contemplating new school choice programs, district administrators often cite the difficulty in overseeing schools of choice. Under choice there will always be some form of public licensing or authorization and some oversight to protect children and public funds. We asked our panelists about their experiences overseeing independent schools, whether schools are chartered or licensed to receive publicly funded tuition vouchers. Following are some of the lessons they shared:

New and existing charter schools face all the challenges of regular public schools. They have to worry about curriculum, staffing, programs, funding, and accountability. They also often face financial pressures that the typical public school never sees (e.g., the cost of capital investment). Nothing in the term “charter” magically guarantees either school stability or quality. While the school is largely responsible for its success, the school’s authorizer also has an important role to play.

Greg Richmond, president of the board of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, established Chicago’s Charter Schools Office in 1996 and headed it until 2003. He’s now in charge of an ambitious effort to create 100 new schools in Chicago. On the issue of how to encourage the development of good schools with fair public oversight, he brings considerable experience to the table. To Richmond, the key is for authorizers to adhere to standards of sound professional practice, very much the way doctors and other professionals focus on shared norms.

Stepping into the oversight role once the school is up and running is, in Richmond’s view, too late to ensure quality. The real work starts with the application. Authorizers need to demand high-quality applications, award charters grounded in performance contracts, provide on-going oversight, and then make hard-nosed, realistic renewal decisions.

“Communities can’t step in and do the authorizer’s job for them. What the community has to do is insist that the authorizers do their job.”

GREG RICHMOND,
CHIEF OFFICER FOR NEW SCHOOLS,
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SIDEBAR A:

PRINCIPLES FOR QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZING

A quality authorizer engages in responsible oversight of charter schools by ensuring that schools have both the autonomy to which they are entitled and the public accountability for which they are responsible.

In furtherance of this end, quality authorizers should:

- approach authorizing deliberately and thoughtfully with the intent to improve the quality of public school options;
- support and advance the purposes of charter school law;
- be a catalyst for charter school development to satisfy unmet educational needs;
- strive for clarity, consistency, and transparency in developing and implementing authorizing policies and procedures;
- be a source of accurate, intelligible, performance-based information about the schools that they oversee;
- be responsible not for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding schools accountable for their performance;
- use objective and verifiable measures of student achievement as the primary measure of school quality; and,
- make the well-being of students the fundamental value informing all decision-making and actions.

Source: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing. (Alexandria, VA; 2004).

For Richmond, the heart of the matter lies in a set of principles and standards for quality charter schools. Developed by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, these principles emphasize school autonomy, accountability, and transparent procedures (see sidebars A and B).

Transparency is also key for Kaleem Caire, Project Director for the Washington, D.C., K-12 Initiative, Fight for Children. Communities and authorizers can't do their jobs, according to Caire, without transparency. Why is this the key ingredient? The community needs to know how authorizers make decisions regarding which charters are approved and renewed, as well as how schools are closed. Transparency in the authorizing process can lead to greater community support; without it, confusion and opposition can arise. "Every charter school that authorizers tried to close," Caire notes, "generated a lot of opposition from parents."

Of course, different communities have different experiences with charters and vouchers. After about six years with charter schools, parents and charter advocates in D.C. successfully pushed the board to fulfill its authorizing role and create better oversight of its schools, according to Virginia Walden-Ford, Executive Director of D.C. Parents for Choice. School choice in Cleveland is in strong shape at the elementary and middle school level, notes parent and voucher recipient Roberta Kitchen, but there's a real challenge at the high school level. East Side students emerging from eighth-grade with vouchers find themselves lacking choices for high school.

In the end, argues Richmond, the community can't do the authorizer's job. The community's task is to insist that the authorizers do their own job. And one way to act on that insistence is to make sure local authorizers follow not just the principles for quality authorizing, but the standards that accompany those principles.

SIDEBAR B:

STANDARDS FOR QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZING

The following standards for quality charter school authorizing were based on the principles laid out in Sidebar A:

- **Agency Capacity and Infrastructure:** A quality authorizer creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary for conducting its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.
- **Application Process:** A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that follows fair procedures and rigorous criteria and grants charters only to those developers who demonstrate strong capacity for establishing and operating a quality charter school.
- **Performance Contracting:** A quality organizer negotiates contracts with charter schools that clearly articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, expected outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms.
- **Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation:** A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that evaluates performance, monitors compliance, informs intervention and renewal decisions, and ensures autonomy provided under applicable law.
- **Renewal Decisionmaking:** A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive data to make merit-based renewal decisions.

Source: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing. (Alexandria, VA; 2004).

These standards call for a genuinely professional approach to ensure that potential charters possess the organizational structures and human and financial resources required for success. They also outline a set of guidelines—governing fair procedures, rigorous criteria, how decisions will be made, contracts defining rights and responsibilities, performance evaluation, oversight and renewal—designed to safeguard the autonomy and integrity of charter schools while providing for public accountability. Chicago, reports Richmond, has rejected about 85% of the charter applications it has received over the years. After all, he notes, “We already have enough low-performing schools. We don’t need to add more.”

A final note pertaining to the oversight of voucher schools: these programs present another policy challenge, according to Caire. The issue is whether existing private schools are able and willing to enroll students on vouchers. Some private schools are inappropriate, concludes Caire, enrolling voucher students to fill out weak budgets, with many of them raising tuition to capture the relatively generous benefits of D.C. vouchers. Similarly, Dayton choice advocates found themselves dealing with private schools, staffed by white middle-class women, that were accepting low-income, minority male students they were unprepared to teach. “If schools accept students, they must be prepared to meet the students’ needs. Choice shouldn’t just be a tool to prop up enrollments,” said Theodore J. Wallace, a board member of Dayton’s Parents Advancing Choice in Education, a privately-funded choice program. Evaluating schools to participate in a voucher program is not easy, and something communities should consider carefully.

Parent Information and Student Admissions

Informing parents that school choice programs exist or helping them decide which school is best for their child is not something traditional public school systems and communities have experience in, yet this is crucial to the success of school choice programs. Two panelists, Virginia Walden-Ford and Roberta Kitchen, have experience with the grassroots organizations that undertook this work in D.C. and Cleveland, respectively.

Parents in Washington, D.C., were upset at the quality of education provided to their children in the late 1990s, according to Virginia Walden-Ford, and many were eager to jump ship. Indeed, some 15,000 students took advantage of 40 charter schools after they were authorized in the nation's capital in 1998.

The January 2003 congressional enactment of D.C.'s school voucher program led coalition groups, including Walden-Ford's organization, D.C. Parents for Choice, to advertise widely, including ads on city buses. More than 3,000 inquiries swamped the D.C. Parents for Choice office, but turning this interest into applications is far from guaranteed, according to seminar participants. During a series of events for parents to apply for the first round of scholarships, in the D.C. Convention Center not nearly as many people showed up. The lesson, according to Walden-Ford: "If you're interested in getting parents' attention, you can't wait for families to come to you. You need to be visible, go into the communities, into the beauty parlors and auto shops, to help parents understand that school choice helps them and helps their families" (see sidebar C).

"Parents are worried about jumping from the frying pan into the fire... We have to fight a parental attitude about charters that says, 'unless there's a big system behind this, it's not top drawer.'"

ROBERTA KITCHEN,
CLEVELAND PARENT

SIDEBAR C:

HOW TO ENGAGE PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES

Here are ten great ideas to engage parents and communities:

- **Meet on their ground.** Go into the communities where the parents are. Don't expect the parents to come to you. Get into the beauty parlors and auto shops.
- **Communicate regularly.** You don't have an audience in front of you, but a parade. You have to keep repeating the message. Newsletters help. So does joining civic groups. Communication needs to be continuous, not one-shot.
- **Information booths always help.** Practically every community has an event during the year that most people attend. Be there. An information booth staffed with well-informed volunteers and literature can really spread the word.
- **Target community-based organizations.** Churches, job-training centers, local community centers, clubs for boys and for girls—these are all useful in getting the message out. Sometimes they're better at carrying the message than you are.
- **Be honest.** You need to be honest with parents about why you're there and what you can do. A new school or scholarship for their child doesn't necessarily create employment for parents.
- **Involve parents.** Parents can also carry the message. They can contribute in innumerable ways—distributing literature, talking to local groups, helping solve transportation problems. Involve parents and find ways to make their contributions real.
- **Value parents.** Put a \$ amount on volunteer service and raise matching funds for it; that way parents understand the real value of the contribution they make. Adult literacy courses are often a good way to engage parents.
- **Understand the opposition.** At some point, people with an interest in maintaining the status quo will challenge you. Be prepared for that—and make sure you have the information you need to respond.
- **Develop advocates with access to the media.** Parents repeat what they hear from the media. If your opponents have access to the media, you need it too.
- **Don't forget word-of-mouth.** Find local leaders in individual communities. They can be your best advocates. Telephone trees work very well—if you have ten people, each able to reach ten more, you're in a good position to fight disinformation.

The D.C. K-12 scholarship program is designed to serve inner-city communities that house the poorest of the poor, with many families living at 185% of the poverty line, according to Walden-Ford. It is hard to pull these lower-income parents into the discussion and get them to meetings, according to Roberta Kitchen, Cleveland citizen activist.

Many minority communities could benefit from small workshops with parents, suggests Vanessa K. DeCarbo, Director of Communications and Research for Hispanic CREO. The Latino role in the community mobilization for school choice is essential. Small group training, town hall meetings, and booths at minority festivals are excellent ways to engage communities, notes DeCarbo, since they provide an opportunity to provide accurate information and to sign up interested parents directly.

Beyond just reaching parents, three other themes arose regarding the type of information parents need. First, some parents simply need to know that choices exist. Kitchen notes that many parents just needed to know that they could take their kids out of failing schools. Second, even if parents do know choices exist, some are suspicious of the programs, even as they're attracted to them. Choice was how upper middle-class families fled public schools, observes Chicago's Richmond. Magnet schools often left behind low-income and minority students. When these perceptions are foremost in people's minds, "parents are not inclined to think choice is always wonderful," he notes. Other parents may have heard "nonsense" from the "anti-choice media that parents regurgitate," reports Kitchen. For these reasons, battling anti-choice rhetoric and ideas that choice isn't for low-income families becomes a very important part of outreach.

Third, low-income parents are frequently intimidated by authority and expertise, and need to be empowered to make these decisions for their families. "We have to get over the idea that some expert knows our own children's needs better than we do," says Kitchen. "We have to fight a parental attitude about charters that says, 'unless there's a big system behind this, it's not top drawer.'" Echoing Kitchen, DeCarbo asserts that parents are entitled to see themselves as superintendents in their own homes.

A particular challenge under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the provision offering parents new school choices if their children are enrolled in schools unable to demonstrate satisfactory progress. Frequently parents are offered only a limited amount of time in which to choose new schools. For many parents, the choice options under NCLB are a virtual dead letter due to late notification. In the nation's capital, notes Walden-Ford, many parents received only two weeks notice that their child had the option of changing schools before being required to identify, gain admission to, and name a new school. "It's not enough time. Receiving schools don't have space. Parents have to go downtown to apply. Families with two or more kids might be faced with multiple decisions," she states. "They have trouble handling this. Our solution involves going into the community very early in the year to alert families that they are very likely to have choices at the end of the school year."

“In Chicago, we try to communicate three things,” reports Richmond, while explaining how Chicago Public Schools approached this stipulation in NCLB. “First, choice schools will be available to you and your children. Second, admissions criteria will be clear, public and fair. Third, schools of choice will produce better educational outcomes for the community’s children. A lot of people may have trouble believing all three, but that’s our message.”

“What all this seems to add up to,” notes Paul Hill, “is that we’re asking people to jump through a lot of application hoops for a long-shot, in a situation in which it’s hard to define what makes a good school. At the end of the day,” he summarizes, “what it all comes down to is community trust. The thing that will make choice work is going into the community.”

The Politics of School Choice

Most choice programs face continual opposition even many years after they are up and running. These battles distract from the operation of schools, and can cause internal divisions within the choice community.

We asked our panelists how they deal with these obstacles and two main themes emerged: first, thoughtful, organized local action is essential; and second, the battle against misinformation is continuous.

“I wasn’t prepared for the ugliness of the fight in D.C.,” acknowledges Walden-Ford. “The opposition told people choice wasn’t for real, that it would destroy public schools, and encouraged them not to sign up.” Although time constraints made it difficult to reach all the eligible communities once the program passed in Congress, she stresses that outreach needs to be constant because “the opposition is relentless. For want of another voice, parents will listen to what they hear. They have to hear from us.”

The psychology of inherited images of what schools should be imposes itself even on choice advocates. “When I got my voucher, I was guilt-tripped,” states Kitchen. “I was told my kids were taking dollars from public schools. Somehow, I began to think I was responsible for the welfare of public education. Think about that. Nowhere else is the person who comes up with a creative alternative expected to also come up with a fix for the old broken system!”

“For years, I’ve avoided the politics of choice. I wanted to save that space for important things, not ugly fights,” said Roberta Kitchen. “In Cleveland, there was so much internal strife, even within the movement, that it gave me headaches.”

Regarding the opposition, Howard Fuller argues that there are both principled and unprincipled opponents of choice. The movement’s best opportunities lie with respecting the opinions of principled opposition, while working to change their opinions.

“The most consistent and challenging opposition comes in two camps: principled and unprincipled opponents. We need to reduce the animosity between choice advocates and public schools. We can do that by focusing on the concerns of principled opponents. We’re not going to change the minds of the unprincipled.”

**HOWARD FULLER, DIRECTOR,
INSTITUTE FOR THE TRANSFORMATION
OF LEARNING, MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY**

The unprincipled opposition is likely a lost cause. And as Greg Richmond points out, many parents are principled and can be convinced of the benefits of choice programs.

In many ways, we don't know the strength of our own voices, suggests DeCarbo of Hispanic CREO, since we overlook the political power of parents. To illustrate this point, she shows a television clip of Hispanics rallying for school choice before the Texas legislature. If Hispanics in the United States graduated from high schools at the same rate as their white counterparts, she says, citing the RAND Corporation, the national tax and social security revenues would increase to the tune of \$19 billion annually.

DeCarbo defines three essential political action steps: organize ourselves while partnering with like-minded organizations; provide educational outreach that is research supported; and mobilize and inspire political action. And the best political action is local, suggests Caire (see Sidebar D). It involves believing in what you're

SIDEBAR D: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY STRATEGY

Nationwide movements are fine, but they have to be implemented at the local level. Here's some advice on how to develop a community strategy:

- **Believe you can win.** There's no need to be shy. History is on your side. Public institutions are moving more and more toward offering citizens more options—and schools will too.
- **Identify a leader.** You need to answer the question, "Who's in charge here?" This person must possess several characteristics: capable of defining a vision; able to care for the flame; at ease with management issues; and able to light a fire under people. The leader must be rock-solid; angry or over-emotional people won't get the job done.
- **Create an action team.** One person can't do it alone. A business can't be just a CEO. Create an action team—people throughout the community willing to move at the drop of a hat.
- **Identify allies and opponents.** Rank everyone from strong to weak (1-5). Work on maintaining your strong support, beefing up your weak support, and converting weak opponents, while ignoring those implacably opposed to you.
- **Educate parents and the public.** Think of your community in thirds—supportive, indifferent, and hostile. Educate all three components around the principle that it's better to build bridges than to burn them.
- **Always think strategically, think tactically only when you have to.** Being tactical is doing what's convenient, being strategic means keeping the vision in mind: education is broken; we need new wheels, and perhaps new shoulders at the wheel.

Source: Kaleem Caire, Fight for Children, Washington, D.C.

doing, finding local leadership, and then creating and expanding the action team. Above all it requires thinking strategically, and only acting tactically when forced into it.

However, a community still needs to keep an eye on the larger issues. Concessions are often made during the political process that develops the legislation, and to go back and change these is difficult. Fuller argues for:

- working for legislation at all levels of government, especially at the state level, to advance school choice;
- amending limits on choice, such as caps on the number of charter schools or amount of money;
- respecting constitutional issues about direct support of churches, but going to court on constitutional issues when necessary;
- keeping an eye out for over-regulation in the name of accountability.

We need to understand, according to Fuller, that opponents are “aided by our divisions, our naïveté, and by our fears and mistakes.”

In mid-2004 the American Federation of Teachers released a study arguing that the achievement of charter school students is no better than achievement in existing public schools. Responses at the seminar vary, from rage about distortions of the data to explanations grounded in the background of charter school students, and further on to anxiety about over-defensiveness that sounds suspiciously like the reactions of the public school establishment. “I worry when the first argument we make is that ‘we have hard kids,’” states Fuller. “We start making excuses and sounding just like some of the educators in the schools these kids came from.”

Getting Funds to Schools

Financing schools choice is complicated by the fact that money doesn't follow the child; rather, state and federal funds often go to specific programs and centralized school district accounting systems make tracking nearly impossible.

As a result, many schools of choice find themselves in battles for funding. As in other sessions, we asked panelists to describe their experiences.

“How do schools make sure they get the money they're entitled to? Ensure accountability for the responsibilities of business or fund manager... while holding the funding source accountable. With regard to special education, charters are public schools. You're entitled to all the services of other public schools. And your students are too!”

RHONDA JONES,
NCB DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

A sure way to provoke a dispute among charter school and public school advocates is to suggest that charter schools receive the same funding as their regular public school brethren. Nothing enrages charter school supporters more than the assumption that they are on equal financial footing with the typical public school. Even when receiving “equal per-pupil funding” amounts, charter schools must typically cover capital costs for building as well as maintenance expenses—costs that are usually carried in central office budgets for non-charter public schools, notes T.J. Wallace of PACE.

Kaleem Caire argues that schools aren't holding money back, but rather that public school administrators rarely know the true amount spent within their buildings and are often at sea regarding where funds are in the system and precisely how much schools of choice are entitled to. Often, as is the case in D.C., it takes time for these problems to be resolved.

Three issues shaped the remainder of the seminar discussion: how to get public funds to schools of choice; the challenges of special education; and how private programs direct funds to where they can do the most good.

Public Funds. Where you stand often depends on where you sit. In Dayton, charter schools receive \$200-\$500 less per child than regular public schools, and no capital support, estimates Wallace. But if charter schools elsewhere are starved for money, in D.C. they are extremely well funded. “D.C. charters receive upwards of \$7,500 per pupil for operating expenses and more than \$2000 per pupil for capital costs,” explains Nelson

Smith of the Charter School Leadership Council. “It’s fabulous. People’s jaws drop when they hear these numbers.”

Elsewhere the challenges are more severe, particularly when dollars are coming disproportionately from the state, as opposed to federal or local sources. “Political deals are cut at the state level,” notes Fuller, “around budgets that compromise funding at the local level. In Milwaukee, for example, we have different amounts for vouchers than we do for charter schools. We shouldn’t settle for pride in doing more with less. Bad argument. There are people out there arguing for educating poor kids in charter schools on the cheap, while spending \$20,000 or more annually on the education of their own children.”

Participants agree on the need to assure the public that funds are properly spent. Voucher students are counted four times a year in Milwaukee, notes Fuller, with an immediate impact on schools losing students. D.C. charters are also very precise about student load, states Walden-Ford, with students counted in September, November and January. “We need to decrease the hostility between choice and public school advocates,” suggests Fuller.

Special Education. The needs of students with disabilities prompted particular attention. Charter schools, observes Walden-Ford, are not well equipped to serve students with special needs, in part because calculations of per-pupil funding often do not include the high cost of special education. “But for the most part,” she adds, “charter schools find a way to respond. Still, sometimes the expense moves schools from being just barely able to make ends meet to fending off the wolf at the door.” The problem, agrees Greg Richmond, is that both charter and other public schools face the same challenge around special education: complex needs and insufficient money combined with bureaucracy and paperwork.

With a background in corporate finance, Rhonda Jones of the NCB Development Corporation passionately explains that school leaders should understand their funding stream. “I’ve looked at a lot of budgets. All public schools and charter schools can use more money. How do schools make sure they get the money they’re entitled to? Ensure accountability for the responsibilities of business or fund manager—a professional who understands the intricacies and evolving statutes that govern funding streams—while holding the funding source accountable. With regard to special education, charters are public schools. You’re entitled to all the services of other public schools. And your students are too!”

Private Programs. Private programs promoting choice go to considerable trouble to make sure funds go to the right place in the right way. Michael Warder of the Southern California Children’s Scholarship Fund, which has provided 16,500 partial annual scholarships to needy students in the Southern California area since 1999, describes a complex process involved with scholarship awards:

- scholarships can be up to \$1,850 a year, accounting for 25%, 50%, or 75% of tuition, depending on income;
- the average household income of recipients is \$25,000, with average tuition of \$2,900—so parents without a lot of money make huge sacrifices to pay for their children’s education;
- 80% of recipients are from public schools; 20% are from private;
- the program operates like a college financial aid office, requiring an IRS Form 1040 or county welfare statements about income from every family, every year;
- the program also requires acceptance from the private school before committing scholarship money, and pays schools twice a year after receiving a “scholarship form.” Signed by the school and the parents, the form certifies 90% attendance by the student and that the parents are current with their portion of tuition.

In D.C., says Mary Anne Stanton of the Washington Archdiocese’s Center City Consortium, 550 opportunity scholarship students attend Catholic parochial schools. Yet students in these schools have received extremely limited Title I services for the past three years. “It’s not that people are deliberately holding back federal money,” she stresses. “It’s the bureaucracy that cannot seem to function in a way that serves our Title I eligible students. The outcome is the children lose valuable services.”

What it all comes down to, suggests Richmond, is that we should stop talking about systems and which is best, or even how to allocate funds. The issue should be framed by “focusing on students needs and then empowering parents to do what’s right for their children.”

A Final Word

The real choice movement is in three parts, argues Paul Hill. The first lies in making sure that schools now working well for poor kids, particularly parochial schools, don't die. The second lies in creating new options. And the third requires rebuilding existing schools. "The choice movement should not be about standing separate from public schools, but about creating new tools in the public toolkit," he suggests.

A genuine sense hung over the meeting that a shift of historic proportions is underway in how public education is defined. If a public school was once understood to be something owned, staffed, funded by and responsible to the public, today there is a greater sense that public funding and responsibility, not staffing and ownership, should define public education. Staffing and organization are secondary issues. A decade ago, the very notion of charter schools disturbed many people in public education. In the new millennium charter schools are widely accepted, due largely to a conviction that choice is an essential right in a democratic society.

The next steps involve: improving how parents receive information, moving beyond parental interest, anxiety and anger into parental action, getting a better sense of what constitutes a good school, and improving responsible authorization and monitoring of new schools. Beyond that, participants agree that choice advocates need to stop talking only to themselves. Perhaps the most difficult next step is enlarging and expanding the conversation to include people interested in, but unconvinced about, the potential benefits of choice.

In the end, the final word goes to Marquette's Fuller, who agrees with Hill. "We have to distinguish between public education and the system that delivers it," says Fuller. "We need to support public education, but advocate different ways of financing and delivering it."

Seminar Panelists

Kaleem Caire

Project Director, D.C. K-12 Education Initiative, Fight for Children

Kaleem Caire joined Fight For Children in April 2003 to serve as project director of FFC's efforts to strengthen K-12 education in the District of Columbia. Prior to FFC, Kaleem was project director for national initiatives and East Coast representative for the American Education Reform Council of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Kaleem also served as the founding president and chief executive officer of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, a Washington-based national association advocating the expansion of educational choice in public and nonpublic school settings for families.

Vanessa K. DeCarbo

Director of Communications and Research, Hispanic CREO

Vanessa K. DeCarbo brings a wealth of corporate and educational experience to Hispanic CREO. Ms. DeCarbo is a Teach for America, 1997 NYC Corps Alumna. She taught 3rd grade at Community Elementary School #73 in the Bronx, serving predominantly African American, Dominican and Puerto Rican families. Prior to assuming her current role, Ms. DeCarbo worked at Cisco Systems, Inc. in Human Resources, where she helped develop Cisco's International Executive Recruitment process. Ms. DeCarbo also worked as an educational curriculum consultant for Modern Red School House, and with the Hispanic Radio Network helping secure federal, foundation, and corporate educational-campaign sponsors.

Howard Fuller

Board Chair, Black Alliance for Educational Options & Executive Director, Institute for the Transformation of Learning

Howard Fuller's career includes many years in both public service positions and the field of education. Dr. Fuller is a Distinguished Professor of Education and Founder/Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Before his appointment at Marquette University, Dr. Fuller served as the Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools June 1991-June 1995. Dr. Fuller is nationally known for his unending support for fundamental educational reform.

Roberta Kitchen*Cleveland, Ohio Parent*

Roberta Kitchen is a single mom and grandmother residing in Cleveland, Ohio. For the last 18 years she has been legal guardian and mother to five children: Tiffany, 23; DeAntye, 19; Tiara, 18; Tatiana, 16; and Toshika, 13; all siblings of a young woman who was unable to care for her children. Employed by Eaton Corporation for the past 28 years, Roberta works in the Financial Accounting Department. Most recently, she has returned to College to complete her Masters in Special Education. Roberta is an advocate for her children; her goal is to place them in a learning environment that will enable them to become men and women of character, with marketable skill sets to compete in and contribute to society. Her three oldest children attended the Cleveland public schools until she became discouraged with the failing school system and withdrew them. Her son is currently a Sophomore in college; two of her daughters attend digital charter schools; the youngest, Toshika, receives a scholarship voucher and is in 8th grade at St. John Nottingham Lutheran in Cleveland. Her oldest daughter is married with two children.

Greg Richmond*Chief Officer for New Schools Development, Chicago Public Schools*

Greg Richmond is the Chief Officer for New Schools Development for the Chicago Public Schools. In that capacity he oversees the school district's charter schools, small schools, and contract schools. In 1996 he established the school district's Charter Schools Office and served as its Director through 2003. In the 2003-04 school year, Chicago's 23 charter school campuses serve over 10,000 students. In 2000, Mr. Richmond founded the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), an organization of school districts, universities, state boards of education, and other public agencies that oversee charter schools. He currently serves as President of that organization.

Virginia Walden-Ford*Executive Director, D.C. Parents for Choice*

Following a career in early childhood education, Virginia Walden-Ford joined Friends of Choice in Urban Schools in 1996. FOCUS is an advocacy organization supporting the growing Washington, D.C. charter school movement. She worked as a volunteer with the Center for Education Reform in their parent outreach campaign in 1997 and worked with the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise as Parent Outreach

Coordinator. She organized parents to support school choice and the D.C. Scholarship Act in 1998 and the D.C. School Choice Incentive Program of 2003, which President George W. Bush signed into law in January 2004. She currently serves as Executive Director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, Inc. Virginia is a National Board Member and a founding member of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, and is Chairperson of the Washington, D.C. Chapter.

Theodore J. Wallace

*Board Member, Parents Advancing Choice in Education
Program Director, Mathile Family Foundation*

Dr. Wallace is the Program Director for Education for the Mathile Family Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. He was the founding director and is now a Board member of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) program, Dayton's privately funded school choice program. PACE provides more than 700 tuition assistance grants to income-qualifying families. PACE helped to create a Dayton Chapter of the national Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) in 2002. Prior to his current roles, Dr. Wallace served as the director of the Center for Catholic Education at the University of Dayton and was a high school teacher and principal for twenty years. He received his doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Dayton in 1995.

Michael Warder

Executive Director, Southern California Children's Scholarship Fund

Michael Warder is Executive Director of the Southern California Children's Scholarship Fund. Started in 1999, the SCCSF has provided about 17,500 annual partial tuition scholarships to children from low-income families in Los Angeles and the surrounding area so that parents can have an opportunity to send their children to better performing private schools. Nationally, CSF has provided nearly 145,000 such scholarships over the last four years. Before joining CSF in August 2001, Mr. Warder held executive positions in leading public policy research organizations, including the Claremont Institute, Rockford Institute, the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., and the Heritage Foundation.

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