

voucher programs. When the Milwaukee program began, a cap was set so that only 1 percent of the school population was allowed to participate. It is now at 15 percent. About 4,000 children participate in the Cleveland program, but the waiting list of applicants exceeds 17,000.

It seems that children who participate in choice programs are forced to incur certain “opportunity costs” in terms of educational expenditures. The further one moves from the traditional public school run by a local district, the higher the cost. For example, in Cleveland, per-capita public spending for children who attend regular public schools is \$7,746; for charter school students, it is \$4,518; and for students who use vouchers, it is \$2,250. This is an unfair competitive arrangement. It is also inequitable. Considering that many of the children who participate in choice programs come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the practice turns the idea of compensatory education on its head.

Yes, theoretically the effect of market competition is measurable empirically, but no, we can not fully assess it under the existing plans. Of course, there are some skeptics who will continue to deny that competition, even unencumbered, with all the artificial constraints removed, will work to improve public education. I don’t share their cynicism. Even if they are wrong, but especially if they are right, the most compelling argument for choice remains a plea for fairness. We don’t need numbers to prove that.

Fighting for School Choice: It’s a Civil Right

Alveda C. King

This selection first appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on 11 September 1997. Alveda C. King is chairman of the Atlanta-based King for America and a senior fellow with the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution.

Thirty years ago, my uncle Martin Luther King Jr. talked about America’s “promissory note” to deliver to all its people the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He dreamed of an

America where all children, regardless of their color or religion or other circumstance, would enjoy the full exercise of those rights.

For our children, a decent education is an integral part of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For parents faced with school violence, pervasive drug use, and sexual license, a choice among different types of education is no less important. This may not make a decent education an “entitlement,” but it certainly gives rise to parents’ desire to direct a process so vital to their children’s future.

Is it moral to tax families, compel their children’s attendance at schools, and then give them no choice between teaching methods, religious or secular education, and other matters? Is it consistent to proclaim, meanwhile, that America is a nation that prides itself on competition, consumer choice, freedom of religion, and parental responsibility?

I can’t presume to know exactly what my uncle would say about the current debate over school vouchers and choice. But I know what principles he taught, and I know that he not only preached but also practiced them. Martin Luther King Jr. and his siblings were products of public and private education. In turn, they educated their children in both public and private schools—and impressed upon my generation the importance of faith and family in effective schooling.

In this spirit, House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R., Texas), Sen. Joe Lieberman (D., Conn.), Rep. Floyd Flake (D., N.Y.), and several other congressmen have proposed the District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act. The measure, which the Senate will likely vote on next week as part of an appropriations bill, is designed to rescue Washington’s public schools by using public and private compensation and incentives.

Under the act, 2,000 low-income students in Washington would receive tuition scholarships of up to \$3,200 per year, which would enable them to attend the public or private school of their choice. The act would also provide 2,000 public school students with vouchers for extra tutoring assistance, worth up to \$500 a year.

In the name of civil rights, some oppose such relief for religious parents who want their children to attend a religious school. In the name of helping poor and minority children, opponents of “opportunity scholarships” want to continue business as usual in the Washington schools—which today remain closed, bankrupt, and not even up to fire code.

The District of Columbia public school system allocates \$10,180 per student, the highest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of

Education. Yet according to the Annie Casey Foundation, 80% of fourth-graders in the Washington public schools score below their grade on basic math skills. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 72% of Washington's fourth-graders test below "basic proficiency."

In response to this appalling failure, Washington's families are choosing alternatives to the deteriorating school system—19.7% send their children to private schools, significantly higher than the national average of 13.1%. Washington public school teachers send their own children to nongovernment schools at a rate of 28.2%, more than double the national average of 12.1%. More than one-third of all Washington teachers, both public and private, send their children to nongovernment schools; the national average is 17.1%. And here's a statistic for the so-called civil-rights leaders: African-Americans comprise two-thirds of Washington's population, yet 61% of the city's families that send their children to private schools are white, and only 12% of the families that do so are black.

These statistics show that a "choice" has already been made. Washington's families and teachers favor a right to choose the paths of education for their families. Of course, there are also those who choose to remain in the public school system. The issue is not what families choose, but rather, that they be allowed and empowered to do so.

Herein lies the challenge. What happens to families who cannot afford to choose a private school over a public school? In part, this is a question of a parent's civil right to determine what is best for a child who cannot make that mature, responsible decision for himself.

U.S. citizenship guarantees all parents an education for their children. This is a true civil right. Yet some children receive a better education than others due to their parents' abilities to pay for benefits that are often missing in public schools. This inequity is a violation of the civil rights of the parents and children who are so afflicted by lack of income and by the mismanagement endemic to so many of the country's public school systems.

The District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act is designed specifically to alleviate this inequality—to restore parents' and children's civil rights. This is not an attempt to destroy public schools. Indeed, all Americans should want the public schools to be the very best that they can be. But we must make it possible for all people to choose the best educational settings for their children, no matter what their circumstances.