



## Why School Vouchers Can Help Inner-City Children

**The Honorable Kurt L. Schmoke**

The Honorable Kurt L. Schmoke is the Mayor of Baltimore. These remarks were delivered at a Manhattan Institute luncheon in New York.

I have been a strong supporter of public education during my tenure as mayor. In 1987 I said that it was my goal as mayor to one day have Baltimore be known as “The City That Reads.” In doing that I underscored my commitment to improving all levels of education and getting people in our city focused on lifelong learning.

The state of Baltimore’s economy was one of a variety of reasons for this commitment. Thirty years before I came into office, the largest private employer in Baltimore was the Bethlehem Steel Corporation’s Sparrow’s Point Plant. When I entered into office, however, the largest private employer in Baltimore was the Johns Hopkins University and Medical Center.

This transition meant that though there were jobs available, they would require a level of education that was higher than that which our children’s parents and grandparents had to attain. It was clear to me that a commitment to improving literacy and understanding that education is a lifelong process was vitally important to our city.

With this knowledge in mind, I worked to improve our library system and our community college. Additionally, we created a Literacy Cor-

poration to combat illiteracy in our city. In fact, President Bush presented Baltimore with the National Literacy Award in 1992.

In addition to my public responsibility for the Baltimore educational system, I also have a strong private interest in our city’s schools. I have two children who are graduates of city public high schools. In fact, both of my children have at some point while growing up attended both public and private schools, so I have been able to observe my own children in different educational environments.

What I’ve found as a result of my experiences in pursuing a better-educated Baltimore, and a better-educated family, is a major void in current school reform efforts. I believe that the issues of competition and accountability are all too often ignored in efforts to improve public education.

My years of experience in education have led me to be in favor of school choice: quite simply, I believe in giving parents more choice about where to educate their children. My support of school choice is founded in the common sense premise that no parent should be forced to send a child to a poorly performing school.

Unfortunately, however, countless parents, especially in the inner cities, are now forced to do just that. Parents in middle- and upper-class communities have long practiced school choice. They made sure that their children attended schools where they would get the best possible education. There is no reason why this option should be closed to low-income parents.

The consequences of this unfairness are not at all difficult to grasp. As one perceptive observer of urban education has written “Education used to be the poor child’s ticket out of the slums. Now it’s part of the system that traps people in the underclass.”

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This was part of the thinking behind what people in Baltimore call my conversion to school choice. It did not happen overnight. It evolved slowly. My belief in school choice grew out of my experiences and, yes, my *frustrations* in trying to improve Baltimore’s public schools over the last twelve years.

Under my watch as mayor we have tried all sorts of programs to reform the schools. Looking back, some of these programs showed promise, and some of our schools did demonstrate that they were doing a good job of educating our children.

Our successes, however, were still the exceptions, not the norm. I feared that, unless we took drastic action, this pattern would only continue. I considered school choice to be an innovation strong enough to change the course of what was widely recognized as an ailing system.

Why school choice? Two reasons: excellence and accountability. Parents want academic *excellence* for their children. They also want to know that there is someone in their child’s school who is *accountable* for achieving those high academic standards.

In most cities in this nation, however, if your child is zoned into a school that is not performing well academically, and where teachers and administrators don’t see themselves as being responsible for academic performance, parents have no recourse. Parents can only send their child to that school and hope for the best.

Under a school choice plan, a parent would have options. There would be consequences for a school’s poor performance. Parents could pull their children out of poorly performing schools and enroll them someplace else. If exercising this option leads to a mass exodus from certain underachieving schools, schools will learn this painful lesson: schools will either improve, or close due to declining enrollments.

Any corporation that tolerated mediocre performance among its employees, unresponsiveness to the complaints of its customers, and the promotion of a large number of failed products, would not survive in the marketplace very long. What is true of corporations should also be true of poorly performing and poorly run schools.

These are some of the ideas that I expressed when I first came out in support of school choice in a speech at Johns Hopkins University in March of 1996, not as a panacea, but as another way to improve public education. Though I thought my remarks were relatively benign, the speech sparked a great deal of controversy.

One of my own aides even joked that he wanted to see my voter registration card to see if I was still a Democrat. Well, I am still a Democrat and I have no plans to change my political affiliation. I, nonetheless, believe that the Democratic Party should reevaluate its position on school choice issues.

In actuality, choice should not be included in partisan rhetoric. School choice should be about giving our nation's children the best possible educational foundation.

The same week as my speech at Johns Hopkins, I appointed a task force to explore the idea of school choice. I asked the task force to consider the pros and cons of school choice programs in all their variations, including programs such as the system implemented in Los Angeles where parents and students have the freedom to choose any school in the public system. I also asked that they investigate private school voucher plans such as the program in Milwaukee, as well as charter and magnet schools.

The task force released a report in that year which recommended that the Baltimore school system expand magnet schools and initiate a system-wide open enrollment program as a way to provide more educational options for parents and their children.

In my view, the task force unfortunately stopped short of endorsing publicly funded vouchers as a way to achieve the goal of school choice. The group, however, did leave open the door for reconsideration of the voucher issue later on. Meanwhile, the Baltimore city public school system has now implemented a variation of the school choice idea through what is called the New Schools Initiative.

These "New Schools" are very similar to charter schools. They are publicly funded schools that are planned and operated by parents or institutions or other non-traditional sponsors.

I recently spoke at Coppin State University for commencement. Coppin State is an historically black college in Baltimore that started out as a teacher training school. Today, under one of the New School Initiatives, Coppin is managing an elementary school in its home neighborhood drawing on its teaching and research to improve that school.

Now, three years after that Hopkins speech, I continue to believe that choice holds the greatest hope for instilling excellence and accountability in the nation's public schools.

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At that time, as a Democrat and an African-American mayor, I was considered a maverick, or worse, for expressing that idea. No longer. A ground swell of support for choice is rising all over the nation, including from some unlikely quarters. Certainly, there's no greater proof of this than the tremendous response to the Children's Scholarship Fund funded by Wal-Mart heir John Walton and financier Ted Forstmann.

Under this program, the parents of some 1.25 million low-income children across the country applied for partial scholarships to help their children attend private and parochial schools. Civil rights pioneer and former mayor of Atlanta Andrew Young wrote these words in a nationally syndicated newspaper column shortly after the results of the scholarship drive

were announced: “1.25 million cries for help, voiced by poor, largely minority families, seeking something most Americans take for granted. A decent education for their children.”

In that column, Young described the collective cry for help as “a moment of moral awakening” that promises to be just as pivotal in America’s civil rights struggle as Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama more than 40 years ago.

Such moments of moral awakening, Young observed, force us to reevaluate our beliefs and finally to take action. In Baltimore, that particular scholarship program attracted twenty thousand applicants. This represents an astonishing 44 percent of city children who were eligible.

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The conclusions that can be drawn from these figures are unmistakable. The *Baltimore Sun* education editor wrote, “We know now that there’s a pent up demand for school choice in the city. And we know that poor parents do care about the education of their children.”

In fact, some low-income African-American parents in our city have shown they care so much that they will even go so far as to look *halfway around the world* in order to find a good school for their children. The school which I refer to is called Baraka, which means blessings in Swahili. It’s located in rural Kenya, 10,000 miles and eight time zones from inner-city Baltimore. And it’s funded by a Baltimore-based foundation, The Abell Foundation. The

Foundation recruits and selects at-risk seventh- and eighth-grade boys from the Baltimore city public schools to participate in this bold education experiment.

The kids chosen for this program are generally headed for serious trouble. It is safe to assume that many of the boys in the Baraka program would have ended up incarcerated, or worse, had they not been selected.

Baraka School is going to begin its fourth year of operation in the fall. With 30 graduates to date, the school is having remarkable success in boosting the academic achievement of these at-risk youngsters and truly turning around their lives.

Because of the persistent resistance to school choice by some Maryland politicians, however, the State Education Department has refused to fund the Baraka School project. I do not speak of any extra funding here. I am only talking about taking the state’s cost of educating each Baraka student, which would normally have gone to the school that they had been assigned to had they remained in the public system, and allowing it to be used to educate the students in this alternative environment.

The state has absolutely refused. Were it not for the support of the Foundation, the Baraka School, which has done such an excellent job for these young men, would have closed.

So, despite greater acceptance of school choice it’s certainly premature to declare victory in the public opinion contest. Indeed, criticisms of school choice are as strident as ever and I am sure you have heard the more familiar ones.

Some say that school choice, especially vouchers, will weaken public education. My response is that choice can only strengthen public education by introducing competition and accountability into the mix. Others claim that school choice is undemocratic. My response to them is that choice is in keeping with the aspirations for freedom that formed the core of American democracy. As former Delaware Governor Pete Du Pont once wrote, “It’s about the liberty to choose what’s best for your children.” All of us should have that choice.

Some say that school choice is elitist, or even racist. The truth is that black low-income children are among the prime victims of the nation’s failing public schools. African-American parents know this all too well. This is why they have been so open to the idea of school choice.

A recent nation poll released by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found a trend toward growing support of tuition vouchers among African-American parents.

Another common criticism of school choice, and especially vouchers, is that it violates the

principle of separation of church and state. A properly structured voucher program is no more a violation of the principle of separation of church and state than is the GI Bill. This program allowed military veterans to use government dollars to attend any university of their choice, public or private, religious or secular.

I am convinced that with time, and through open dialogue, critics of school choice will come to see this movement for what it is: part of an emerging new civil rights battle for the millennium, the battle for education equity. We need to give poor children the same right that children from more affluent households have long enjoyed. The right to an education that will prepare them to make a meaningful contribution to society. It is that simple.

In speaking of battles, and in closing, I remind you of those few words of wisdom from Victor Hugo: “Greater than the tread of Mighty Armies, is an Idea whose Time has Come...” As we look to the future, evidence is increasingly compelling that school choice is such an idea.

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