



A *SCHOOL CHOICE* ACTIVIST

An Alliance for School Choice Publication

January 2008

Louisiana Rising New Leadership Brings Hope to Bayou State

INSIDE:

**Exclusive - Presidential Candidates
Reveal Views on School Choice**

**Georgia Special Needs Program
Exceeds Expectations**



ALLIANCE FOR SCHOOL CHOICE

Inside This Issue

Georgia Special Needs Scholarship a Great Success 3

Louisiana Rising 4

5 Questions 5

Presidential Candidates Speak Out on School Choice 6

School Choice a Key Issue for Latino Voters in 08 7

Despite Valiant Effort, Utah Voucher Program Defeated at Polls 8

School Choice News Roundup 9

At the Alliance 11

The Last Word 12

School Choice Activist
January 2008

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School Choice Activist is published by the national nonprofit Alliance for School Choice. The mission of the Alliance for School Choice is to improve our nation's K-12 education by advancing systemic and sustainable public policy that empowers parents, particularly in low-income families, to choose the education they determine is best for their children.

Editor's Note



Welcome to the new *Activist*. We have redesigned our quarterly newsmagazine to include additional stories, exclusive interviews with newsmakers, and updates from school choice organizations throughout the country.

Our top story this month is about Louisiana, a state that very well may become the next frontier for school choice. During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we as a nation were glued to our television sets, aghast at the devastation. Now, with the election of U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal as the state's new governor, hope is building that, out of the chaos that the storms wrought, a better education system will emerge.

You'll also get a first look at our extensive survey of presidential candidates and their views on school choice. John Schilling, our chief of staff, took on the daunting task of attempting to get responses from busy candidates. To our delight, five contenders responded.

I'm sure you'll also be pleased with our story on the success of the Special Needs Scholarship Program in Georgia. It's only fitting that this article is written by our State Projects Director, Lori Drummer, who herself played an integral role in the program's passage.

I hope you enjoy the new *Activist*. And, from all of us here at the Alliance and Advocates for School Choice, please have a safe and happy holiday season and a joyous 2008.

With warmest regards,

Andrew Campanella, Editor

From the States

Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program a Great Success

By Lori Drummer

Of the more than 5,700 Georgia families that applied this past summer for the state's new special needs scholarships, 899 students are now enrolled into one of the 117 private schools approved by the Georgia State Board of Education for the 2007-08 school year.

These families learned about the scholarship over a relatively short timeframe.

Gov. Sonny Perdue

(R) signed the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program into law on May 18, and students had to be enrolled in a participating private school by September 10. Schools had to report the scholarship-student enrollment to the Georgia Department of Education by September 21.

"This is astounding that just three months after Gov. Sonny Perdue signed our legislation into law, so many children have been able to use the scholarship," Georgia Rep. David Casas (R-Lilburn), the House sponsor of the legislation, said. "It is truly a testament to the hard work of the state Department of Education and Superintendent Kathy Cox. They worked diligently to implement this law

and made sure we had qualified schools available for these very special children."

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship

Program allows parents of children with disabilities to use the state dollars that would have been spent on their children's education in public schools to send them to the public or private school of their choice. The Georgia Department of Education reports that the average voucher is \$6,273.

"We have far exceeded our expectations for the first year"

—Senator Eric Johnson

Parents Exercise Choice

"We have far exceeded our expectations for the first year," said Georgia Sen. Eric Johnson (R-Savannah), primary sponsor of the authorizing legislation. "I am committed to seeing to it that all children get the best possible education. If parents believe their child can get a better education elsewhere, then it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to provide that."

With the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship, families *are* receiving support. Gilbert and Nadine James' son David, 10, entered sixth grade at St. Peter Claver in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur. David, who has a speech impediment and receives



Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue

speech therapy twice a week, left DeKalb County public schools, where he would have attended Salem Middle School.

"The middle school David was slated for has been ranked as failing during the past four years," Nadine James said. "I didn't think he would receive the level of school work he needed at Salem. And with the scholarship, we were willing to pay the difference."

"He has been there about two weeks, but he has really adjusted, and they are giving him some extra help," Nadine said. "There are only 15 people in his class. He had 25 children in his other classes."

Though tuition at St. Peter Claver is a little more than \$7,000 a year, and the James family qualified for a \$4,500 scholarship, Nadine said it "opens up a window for us to do this."

"My child is worth it," Nadine said. "If I have to go and get another part-time job, I would do it. I am just so encouraged. He is so much more enthused because he is excited about his teachers." ●

Louisiana Rising

Jindal Elected with Overwhelming Mandate
Could Louisiana be the next frontier for school choice?



On October 20, U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal (R), a supporter of school choice, was elected as the state's new governor. Facing 11 opponents in the state's unique primary system, Jindal triumphed with 54 percent of the vote.

At 36, Jindal will be America's youngest governor, and will arrive in Baton Rouge amidst hopes that he will shepherd



ethics and education reform to Louisiana as the state continues to rebuild after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Gov. Elect Bobby Jindal

In a state where 75 percent of children receive free or reduced lunch, and where education officials score 72 percent of schools a 2 on a quality scale of 1-5, reform is much overdue.

"Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal is likely to face renewed efforts to pass a school choice measure in the state [while] continuing restoration of schools in New Orleans," wrote Linda Jacobson in the national education magazine *Education Week* on October 31.

During the campaign, Jindal echoed similar themes in speaking with local newspapers.

"We cannot sentence any child to a poor education if they just happen to live within

a certain geographical boundary," he told the *Baton Rouge Advocate*. "We should consider all options to help parents whose children are trapped in failing schools. This includes improving public schools, partnering public schools with universities and businesses, charter schools, and even private schools."

Speaking about education reform at his victory party, Jindal said that Louisiana schools have "failed too many children for too long.... We can change, we must change, we will change!"

For the Louisiana Children's Educational Alliance (LCEA), the new Jindal administration—along with a cadre of new legislators—presents an opportunity to reintroduce choice options to the state. Last year, a Democratic-sponsored tuition tax credit bill passed resoundingly, but was vetoed by Governor Kathleen Blanco. Blanco, who has been roundly criticized for her mismanagement of the Hurricane Katrina response, sent her six children to *private* schools.

Despite setbacks under Blanco's tumultuous four-year tenure, the LCEA has made significant inroads in building support throughout the state.

"We've been working with a lot of the local businesses and community leaders, as well as the private school sector," said Ellen Davis, LCEA executive director. "We've also been educating and informing legislators about the positive impact of school choice, and we've been getting the word out to everyone about why we need to empower parents."

Continued on page 5

Top Story

Continued from page 4

One important key to education reform in Louisiana is the work of the Louisiana chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), which has permanent staff in Louisiana and has spent nearly a year meeting with clergy, legislators, and youth.

“Following Hurricane Katrina, BAEO made a decision to work closely with black leadership in Louisiana and build a growing contingency of parental choice advocates,” said Shree Medlock, Louisiana state director for BAEO. “We will build our reputation and brand slowly, yet deliberately, as we build a base of individuals committed to school choice.” ●



5 Questions

Louisiana's Ellen Davis

5 Questions is now a regular section of the *Activist*. In this section, the *Activist* spotlights a state-level school choice champion. This edition features Ellen Davis, the executive director of the Louisiana Children's Educational Alliance (LCEA).



How did you get involved in this movement?

I was executive director of the Republican Party in Louisiana, and I've always loved the school choice issue. I think education is fundamental to Louisiana's success over the next 10 years. Without solving the education crisis, we won't be able to compete economically.

What unique challenges and opportunities does Louisiana pose for school choice?

Hurricane Katrina only highlighted the breakdown of the education system here in the state. Now, a lot of schools are still not up and running, and even private schools in some areas are overcrowded. Our concentration of population has shifted.

If private schools are overcrowded, how can school choice be effective?

The overcrowding is only taking place in certain areas. There are more than 400,000 children in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, and many of these children are in failing public schools. With a new school choice program, a lot of the current, better private schools will expand and new schools will open up.

What has the LCEA been doing to build grassroots support for such an initiative?

We've been working with a lot of the local businesses and community leaders, as well as the private school sector. We've also been educating and informing legislators about the positive impact of school choice, and we've been getting the word out to everyone about why we need to empower parents.

Do you think there will be strong opposition to school choice in Louisiana?

The unions and the state school boards association have voiced opposition to school choice. But, I do feel that the tides are changing in Louisiana. A lot of the new legislators and community leaders are supportive of reform, because our school system has been failing for 30 years. ●

Presidential Candidates Speak Out on School Choice

Responses to ASC's School Choice Candidate Questionnaire



In late August, the Alliance for School Choice distributed a comprehensive *Presidential Candidate School Choice Questionnaire* to all major Democratic and Republican candidates for president. The Alliance sent questionnaires and information requests to all candidates on three separate occasions via mail, e-mail, and telephone. The Alliance received responses from five candidates (summarized below). To view completed questionnaires and the full text of candidate statements, visit the ElectionWatch '08 section of our Web site in mid-January.



Mayor Rudy Giuliani (R-NY)

“My decision to support school choice—and my fight to implement a voucher program in New York—was directly related to my experience as Mayor and my battle with the educational bureaucracy. I concluded

that true reform could only be achieved by allowing parents to choose their child’s school, whether public, private, or parochial. Promoting school choice is not an alternative to improving public education; it is essential to create pressure for continued improvement.”



Sen. Mike Gravel (D-AK)

“Bringing competition into the education industry has the potential to raise the quality of public and private schools alike. There is no reason for children attending violence-prone and drug-ridden schools to suffer because politicians refuse to try something new.”

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 6



Gov. Mike Huckabee (R-AR)

“The Governor supports vouchers for students trapped in chronically failing schools. He also supports the Fair Tax, which makes

all education-related expenses tax-free, including private and parochial school tuition and homeschooling expenses.”



Sen. John McCain (R-AZ)

“American Education must be worthy of the promise we make to our children and ourselves. We are a

nation committed to equal opportunity, and there is no equal opportunity without equal access to excellent education.... We must place parents and children at the center of the education process, empowering parents by greatly expanding the ability of parents to choose among schools for their children. All federal financial support must be predicated on providing parents the ability to move their children, and the dollars associated with them, from failing schools.”



Gov. Mitt Romney (R-MA)

“I believe we need to let freedom ring in our education system. That means giving all parents the opportunity to

exercise a choice over where their child goes to school. When parents and kids are free to choose their school, everyone benefits. That’s because competition and choice in educational opportunities—whether it comes from private schools, charter schools, or homeschooling—makes traditional public schools better and improves the quality of education for all of America’s kids.” ●

School Choice a Key Issue for Latino Voters in 08



The War in Iraq, the economy, and health care are clearly key election issues for presidential candidates in 2008, but among Hispanic voters, school choice may very well prove to be a key priority.

Two recent public opinion surveys, one conducted by the Hispanic Council on Reform and Educational Options (Hispanic CREO) and the Alliance for School Choice, and another conducted by Harvard University, demonstrate that Hispanics strongly support school choice programs. One poll indicates that school choice is a top voting issue among Latinos.

The Harvard study, published by *Education Next* magazine, indicated that 61 percent of Hispanics support vouchers for low-income families. Similarly, 54 percent of Hispanics support initiatives to provide school vouchers to all children in failing public schools.

In the Hispanic CREO/Alliance poll, a bipartisan survey conducted by the polling company, inc. and The Ampersand Agency, 65 percent of Hispanic voters said they are more likely to vote for candidates who support school choice than candidates who do not. Only 19 percent stated that they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who supported school choice.

The poll also showed that education is among the top three voting issues for 82 percent of Latino voters, with the highest percentage (43 percent) of poll respondents rating school choice as their top educational priority.

A full 75 percent of the Hispanic parents polled said that they would be interested in using their own tax dollars to send their children to a private school—or to a public school in a higher-performing district. ●

At the Polls

Despite Valiant Effort, Utah Voucher Program Defeated at Polls

A program that would have provided increased educational options for all Utah children was defeated in a statewide referendum on November 6. The program would have provided vouchers in the amounts of \$500 to \$3,000, depending on household income.

In a statement released on election night, the Alliance stated that “thousands of disadvantaged children will be denied increased educational options because the voucher program, which was passed earlier this year by the Utah legislature and signed into law by Gov. Huntsman, will not be implemented.”

The Alliance honored the valiant efforts of the thousands of parents who volunteered their time to support this referendum.

“These parents knew that ballot referenda, on any subject, rarely pass. But despite this, they worked mightily, and we salute them,” said Zack Dawes, state projects consultant for the Advocates for School Choice.

“Titanic Clash”

As the *Utah Daily Herald* summarized in an October 8 article: “This seemingly modest reform of the state’s education system would register barely a blip on the financial balance sheet. It would directly serve a mere 3 percent of Utah students and cost less than 1 percent



of the state’s \$10.5 billion budget. Yet it has called forth a titanic clash of philosophical values... that education advocates are watching closely.”

In fact, the National Education Association spent millions of dollars to fund a negative campaign against Referendum 1. In September, *The Wall Street Journal* rebuked the NEA for its history of decrying out-of-state spending on local education issues while, at the same time, spending more than \$3 million to overturn the Utah voucher program.

Popular Supporters

Despite this, the Utah parent group spearheading the fight for the voucher program relied mainly on support from within the state. Parents for Choice

in Education enlisted the support of a husband-and-wife team who are extremely popular in Utah, Richard (pictured above) and Linda Eyre. The Eyres, authors of more than 20 books on parenting and values, appeared in television spots that used Oreo cookies to demonstrate the various benefits of the voucher program.

Emboldened to Fight Harder

In its statement, the Alliance acknowledged that school choice supporters were “rightly disappointed” by the defeat, but added that supporters should be “emboldened to fight even harder to help the children in America who are too often forgotten.” ●

School Choice News Roundup

Rhode Island Businesses Donate \$1 Million to Tax Credit Program

Corporations in Rhode Island have risen to the challenge and contributed more than \$1 million towards tuition scholarships, as part of the state's new corporate tax credit program. Enacted by the legislature last year, the program allows corporations to receive up to a 90 percent tax credit on contributions of up to \$100,000 annually to scholarship-granting organizations.

"By hitting the million-dollar mark, corporations in Rhode Island have met the cap that the state has placed on tax-exempt contributions to the program," said Dan Corley, board member of the Rhode Island Scholarship Alliance (RISA).

"The board of RISA and the state of Rhode Island have worked cooperatively and effectively to raise money for this new program," said Anna Varghese-Marcucio, director of state projects for the Alliance. "This program has the potential to provide scholarship opportunities for thousands of students."

Pennsylvania Expands Tax Credit Funding to \$75 Million

The Pennsylvania legislature and Governor Ed Rendell have expanded funding for the state's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program, from \$59 million to \$75 million. The program currently benefits more than 37,000 students.

Pennsylvania's REACH Alliance, which advocated for the increase, praised the decision, which marked one of the first times that a Democratic governor vocally praised a school choice program.

"I know that I speak for the tens of thousands of families whose children are benefiting from the program when I extend a heartfelt thanks to all who supported the EITC program," said Andrew T. LeFevre, REACH executive director.



Since the creation of the EITC program in 2001, more than 2,100 companies have contributed to scholarship-granting organizations, donating more than \$200 million to support school choice for Pennsylvania's families.

Efforts to Reauthorize D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program Ramping Up

Parents in Washington, D.C. are gearing up to fight for reauthorization of the nation's first and only federally-funded voucher program, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). Legendary activist and director of the D.C. chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), Virginia Walden Ford (pictured above right), is leading the effort to take their case to Capitol Hill.

The program is in the midst of another record year. Enrollment for the 2007-2008 school year increased 5.5 percent, and there are now more than 1,900 students receiving scholarships. Moreover, these scholarships are getting to the children



most in need. The average income of scholarship recipients is just over \$17,000 for a family of four, and more than 80 percent of the students would be attending a failing school were it not for the OSP. Demand for the program continues to outpace the available supply of scholarships by nearly 4 to 1.

A May 2007 report from Georgetown University showed overwhelming parent satisfaction with the program. In addition, the report showed that OSP students have increased their self-esteem, are more engaged in their school work, and that OSP parents are becoming informed educational consumers. The fourth-year annual report from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is expected to be released next spring. This will be the first report to look at a significant amount of academic data over the first few years of the program.

The coalition of political, business, philanthropic, and community leaders supporting reauthorization continue to battle a determined opposition. From People for the American Way to the teachers' union to an anti-school choice

Continued on page 10

School Choice News Roundup

Continued from page 9

Democratic leadership in Congress, there are those who are determined to deny low-income children in Washington, D.C. the same educational opportunity afforded their higher-income peers. A recent Heritage Foundation report reinforced the double standard used by many Members of Congress who send their own children to private schools, but oppose giving low-income parents the same opportunities.

A recent poll by the Greater Washington Urban League demonstrated that 69 percent of District parents support the Opportunity Scholarship Program and stand solidly behind Mayor Fenty's leadership on school reform. OSP also enjoys the support of the *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and *Washington Examiner* editorial boards. Longtime activists like Ms. Walden Ford vow a strong and vigorous fight for reauthorization.

"Parents here in the District are expressing their frustration in a school system that is taking too long to fix itself," Ford said. "These parents understand that by organizing and raising their voices, much can be done to make sure that their children receive the education they deserve."

18 Groups Advocate for Private School Choice in NCLB

Eighteen state and national advocacy groups called upon President Bush, the United States Congress, and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to include meaningful and effective private school choice options in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The initiative was headed up by

An Open Letter to President Bush, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and Members of the United States Congress on the Reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)

Today, there are millions of American children stuck in failing public schools.

These schools are categorized by the federal government as "In Need of Improvement" because they have not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years. This fall, more than 10,000 schools are in this category. Among these schools, over 2,000 have required improvement for five or more years and need to restructure.

Imagine if your child was in a failing school for five years—nearly half of his or her K-12 education?

During the negotiations for initial passage of *No Child Left Behind* six years ago, meaningful parental choice was an early casualty. In its place was the offer of "public school choice" for children in failing schools. Sadly, less than one percent of eligible children have been able to exercise public school choice under NCLB, despite repeated polls demonstrating high levels of parental support for, and interest in, school choice. Instead, the truth is that many school districts have actively worked to thwart access to public school choice, and there has been little meaningful enforcement of this provision at the local, state, or federal levels.

"Imagine if your child was in a failing school for five years—nearly half of his or her K-12 education?"

Far too many low-income children in Title I schools are suffering, year after year, in academically dysfunctional schools, and they have few, if any, viable options for realizing the same educational opportunity afforded to their higher-income peers. In effect, these children are being penalized because of their low-income status.

"...every low-income child in a restructuring school should be given a promise scholarship to attend a public or private school..."

This crisis hurts African-American and Hispanic children the worst and is one of the primary reasons that the achievement gap in America's public schools persists. It is disgraceful that our nation tolerates this injustice.

We ask: are you willing to go beyond what is deemed "acceptable" by the education establishment and act now to help these children obtain a quality education?

The spirit of *No Child Left Behind* is that every child—regardless of income, race, or ability—deserves a quality education. We support and embrace that vision. To make it a reality, however, Congress must include meaningful and effective parental choice that provides an immediate path to a better education. NCLB made a well-meaning, but insufficient, step in this direction, and it has been a promise unfulfilled for far too many disadvantaged children.

We firmly believe that every low-income child in a restructuring school should be given a promise scholarship to attend a public or private school of their parents' choosing. This should happen immediately as a matter of social justice. Additionally, we believe that Congress should authorize and appropriate funds for national opportunity scholarships, where local non-profits could apply for federal grants that would provide scholarships to low-income children in schools that have failed for three consecutive years.

Please do not continue to deny America's poorest children their right to a quality education. **We urge you to include meaningful and effective parental choice as you work to reauthorize *No Child Left Behind*.**

Advocates for School Choice, Charles R. Hokanson, Jr., President
American Legislative Exchange Council, Lori Roman, Executive Director
Center for Education Reform, Jeanne Allen, President
Commonwealth Foundation (PA), Nathan Benefield, Director of Policy Research
Connecticut Federation of Catholic School Parents
DC Parents for School Choice, Virginia Walden Ford, President
Grassroots Institute of Hawaii, Richard O. Rowland, President
Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Maite Arce, Vice President of Operations
Louisiana Children's Education Advocates, Ellen Davis, Executive Director
Parents Challenge, Evelyn D. Taylor, President

Parents for Choice in Education (Utah), Elisa Clements, Executive Director
Parents for Free Choice in Education, Israel Titelbaum, Co-Founder
REACH Alliance (Pennsylvania), Andrew T. Lefevre, Executive Director
Rhode Island Scholarship Advocates, Donna McGowan, Executive Director
School Choice New York, David Smith, President
School Choice Ohio, TJ Wallace, Interim Executive Director
Small Business Hawaii, Sam Slom
United New Yorkers for Choice in Education, Timothy P. Mulhearn, President

Advocates for School Choice.

Asking lawmakers to "imagine if your child was in a failing school for five years—nearly half of his or her K-12 education?" the signatories advocated for promise scholarship programs and national opportunity scholarships, which are designed to give low-income parents of students in schools that have failed for three years in a row the ability to choose the public or private school that best meets the needs of their children.

The letter was distributed in a full-page advertisement in *The Hill* newspaper, and a copy was faxed to each member of Congress.

As a result of the efforts of the group, Advocates has participated in media interviews on 12 major local and regional radio stations across the country. ●

At the Alliance

Alliance/Advocates Reach Out to Legislators At Events



The Alliance and Advocates for School Choice recently held three well-attended seminars on school choice, designed specifically to educate state legislators and local leaders about the benefits of private school choice. As a key sponsor of the American Legislative Exchange Council’s “ALEC School Choice Academy,” Alliance staff presented information on bill design, media relations, school choice research, and polling to 48 legislators from around the country. The event took place in Atlanta.

In Nashville this past September, the Alliance hosted a legislative task force on “Increasing Republican Support for School Choice.” More than 30 local leaders and legislators participated. Informational sessions included an overview of the school choice movement’s progress by Alliance national consultant Scott Jensen (pictured above), presentations regarding polling by John Schilling of the Alliance and Wes Anderson of On Message, Inc, and a discussion on political action hosted by Greg Brock of All Children Matter.

In Austin, the Alliance hosted a “Special Needs and School Choice” Legislative Task Force. Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute presented research regarding the effectiveness of vouchers for children with special needs, and panelists discussed issues such as the importance of engaging private schools in legislative debates and developing effective public education campaigns.

Alliance Welcomes Research Manager

The Alliance recently welcomed Geoffrey Goodman as research manager. Previously, Geoffrey served as a writer and policy analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, working on elementary and secondary education and higher education issues.

Geoffrey will be spearheading the Alliance’s tactical research activities, including compiling research and serving as editor of the *School Choice Digest* magazine.

New Brochure Published, New Web Site on the Way

The Alliance for School Choice has printed a new brochure, *School Choice: Putting Parents in Charge*. The 10-page brochure serves as a primer on school choice, detailing the different types of school choice programs and the current success of school choice efforts. The Alliance is planning to launch its completely-redesigned Web site in January (see below for a sneak peek at our new homepage.) ●

The Last Word: Commentary by Charles R. Hokanson, Jr.

Now Is The Time To Stand Up For *Real* School Choice



Imagine if your child was stuck in a failing school for the majority of her elementary school

education? Chances are, she would be far below grade level in reading and math, which, if not remedied, could place her in the back of the class for the rest of her K-12 education, making it harder for her to succeed in other academic areas. Or, what if your child's high school continually failed to equip him with the skills he needs to succeed in college and the workplace? I bet you would not tolerate it, that is, if you had real options.

Many parents do not have good options when it comes to their child's education. The fact is that millions of children, mostly low-income and minority, are trapped in schools that are failing them day after day, year after year. *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) took a first step at fixing this crisis by shining a spotlight on schools that need to improve and drawing attention to the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their higher-income and white peers. But, it was only a first step. While it shines a spotlight, it doesn't provide a real way out for millions of children in schools on NCLB's "need for improvement" list.

This fall, more than 10,000 schools are deemed "in need of improvement" because they have not made adequate yearly progress for two or more years. And over 2,300 of these schools have failed for at least five years and are required to restructure. NCLB provides children in these failing schools the option of transferring to a better public school. Yet, since the law was enacted nearly six years ago, only around one percent of eligible children have exercised this right.

Far too often, school districts have hindered or discouraged parents' exercise of choice and, when given the opportunity to choose, parents do not have any good options. One Florida school district's letter to parents said: "While we must clearly offer Title I students a choice of transferring to another school or supplemental services, we strongly urge parents to consider the benefits of keeping your child and the financial resources in your home school." This kind of pressure on parents to not exercise their options shamefully goes against the spirit of NCLB.

Now is the time for Congress and President Bush to provide real options for children trapped in failing schools. Every low-income child in a school that needs to restructure should be given a promise scholarship to attend a public or private school of their

choice. Also, Congress should grant funds to local non-profits to provide opportunity scholarships for low-income children in schools that have failed for at least three consecutive years.

Providing meaningful choice to NCLB is widely supported among the public. Nationally, according to a recent survey by *Education Next* and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard, the public supports private school choice by a margin of two to one. And, support among African-Americans and Hispanics is even greater, at three to one.

Rather than making private school choice a negotiating point in NCLB reauthorization, President Bush and members of Congress need to stand up for America's most vulnerable children by adding real school choice into the law. This is a matter of social justice, not politics. ●

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles".

Charles R. Hokanson, Jr.
President of the Alliance for School Choice