

School Choice: A Vehicle for Achieving Educational Excellence in the African-American Community

By Polly Williams

I would like to thank The Heritage Foundation for inviting me to participate in their Black History Month series to talk about something that is very near and dear to my heart, and that is school choice: parental involvement, or school choice, or vouchers, or whatever you want to call it. What we did in Milwaukee was to help empower our parents to be able to make decisions that they felt were best for their children. I enjoy these types of meetings so I can share what we have done and to say to everyone that they can do the same thing. If we can do it in Milwaukee, it can happen anywhere on the face of this Earth. The choice program has really put Milwaukee on the map.

We are in the second year of the program and we have approximately 550 students in the program now. The first year we had approximately 420 students whose parents opted to get into the program, but because immediately after the bill was passed we were sued by the teachers union, a lot of parents dropped out; they were afraid because they were poor that the powerful union would beat them. These parents said they were going to put their kids back in the public schools because they were afraid that when they lost in the courts they were going to be stuck with no school for their kids. But we won.

As soon as the bill passed, we did not know that what we had done was historic. Most of the time when poor people accomplish things nobody even mentions it. We have been struggling and fighting all of our lives; we never get any real national, front page coverage. Our own state's largest newspaper did not even run the story. Since our own newspapers did not even recognize our victory, we just went on about our business.

Angry Union. And then I got a call from Clint Bolick at the Landmark Legal Foundation and he wanted to let me know that if I needed any help, he was there to assist me. Now, we did not know at the time that we were going to need any help, because we did not know that we had done anything to upset people. I just thanked him for calling, but I did not think I would need to call him back. And it turns out we had to call him right away, because the teachers union immediately took us to court. It shook up the teachers union that we had help from someone in Washington.

So anyway, we are in court right now. We have made several court appearances over the issue of funding. The teachers unions say that we were not supposed to take public dollars for private schools, that to do so is unconstitutional and illegal. The fact that the program is helping low-income students, and that those students are succeeding, has never been the issue for the teachers union. They maintain that we are not supposed to take public money. How will they hold their captive audience and keep teachers employed if parents begin to take their kids out of school and get them educated? The one thing you cannot have is kids coming out of your schools educated, because then what are the teachers going to do?

Polly Williams is a Wisconsin State Representative.

She spoke at The Heritage Foundation on February 5, 1992, in a lecture series observing Black History Month.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1992 by The Heritage Foundation.

So, they have us in court. Our most recent court hearing was October 4, 1991, and Landmark was there with Clint Bolick and Jerry Hill. Our State Supreme Court has not ruled yet. They were supposed to rule in December 1991 to tell us their decision about whether they are going to pull the funds from the program. Then they said they were going to do it in January 1992 when we go back in session, and now it's February and they have not given us a ruling yet.¹

We know that for the Supreme Court to rule against us is to say that the children who are currently being educated—children who are learning, children who are being successfully educated—are going to be put back into a bankrupt system where they surely will fail. It is going to take a lot for the court to do that, given the fact that they have to look into the faces of these parents and say, "We're taking your child and putting him back in that bankrupt system where we know he is going to fail, and we are taking him out of this place because he is being educated." It is a hard decision for the State Supreme Court to make. To me, the issue is very simple. It is a good program, the kids are learning, leave them alone.

Parents Sticking Together. The parents are saying that they are not going to tolerate their children being miseducated anymore, and that they are the ones who are ultimately responsible for what happens to their children. The parents are going to be the ones who will stick together and stand up and fight. They are going to do it because they have people like me, Landmark Legal Foundation, and other people who are there to say, "We are with you to help you help your own children." And it is only when we come together and fight the bureaucracy that we can get what we need, because if the bureaucracy refuses to be responsive to us, then we are not obligated to maintain support. If we can accept what happened in Eastern Europe, if we can accept the fact that Communism can fall after seventy-some years, I do not see why we cannot stand and fight a bureaucracy that is doing a terrible job, that is harming our children, and that is hurting this whole country. When we have children who walk across the stage at graduation and cannot read and write, that hurts all of us.

In my school district we have a 90 percent failure rate. Now, how do you tolerate a 90 percent failure rate every year, with \$6,000 a year of taxpayers' dollars being misspent to fund failure? Some 14.9 percent of the Milwaukee freshmen who enter our high schools do not graduate from 12th grade. And of those who remain in school and walk across the stage and pick up that certificate of attendance, only 10 percent of those children can read that piece of paper—10 percent. And we are tolerating this situation in our public schools.

And the reason for it is not the system or the school, it is the parents. It is people like me. It is single, poor, socially deprived people. If your children come out of a home like my home—my husband and I divorced very early—the kids are supposedly doomed. My son is the one male in a household of four or five women; he's supposed to be in jail right now, if you listen to the social critics. My son is thirty-five years old and all of my children have successfully finished school, are doing well, have never been in trouble with the law, and you are calling me to speak to you. Yet I am one of those people who is supposed to be very stupid because I am black, I live in the inner city, I am poor, and I raised my children in a single home. Well, those are all lies.

The only thing different about us is that we have been deprived of resources and access. When you empower parents like myself, there is a major difference. We become responsible for our own lives. We want to be responsible for ourselves. We are sick and tired of dependency on social programs that take away all of our will, motivation, and drive.

¹ In March, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court ruled that the Milwaukee School choice program is permissible under the state's constitution.

We want what everybody else wants. We want to be self-sufficient. We want to have equal access to all of the resources in society and then begin to decide for ourselves what we want. It is like James Brown said, "We don't want anybody givin' us anything." We just want you to open up the door and we'll get it ourselves. It is then up to us to use and learn how to gain access to the system.

We are going to make mistakes. Another thing our saviors want to do is to save us from ourselves. We cannot make any mistakes. Well if you do not make mistakes, there is no learning. We have been living too much with everyone else's mistakes. We need to learn from our own mistakes.

We want to be empowered, and that is what the choice program has done. It has empowered low-income families to take control and decide for themselves what they want for their children. And we have taken control of that state dollar that was going into the public school system that was failing the child. Now, the parents of over a thousand low-income children have a choice. If you are poor, you can get into this program; 1,000 kids can go to a private, non-sectarian school located in Milwaukee. And parents are running to get into this program.

Poor people want the same things for their children that people with money want. We all want our children to be successful, because when our children achieve we feel good. And when our children fail, we feel bad. We know that for low-income families, the only way out of poverty is education. We want our children educated. I do not know any poor parents who do not want their children educated. Some of us do not know how to go about accessing the system. We need to begin to help parents, and give them information; then they can make a determination about what they want to do.

Informing Parents. Because of the lack of information, a lot of our children are failing in school, because their parents do not know what their rights are. And that is what we are doing—informing the parents so they know what their rights are, and making sure that those resources are made available to them. If the funds are allocated equally, then those people who are having a problem will find a solution. We did. We went to the parents and said, "Look, we have this problem. We are going to try and make an alternative for you, but you have to come and you have to work. You have to make that commitment to help your own children." And parents came. That is the thing that shocked the bureaucracy, because they never could get parents to come to a meeting. But we had meetings with 200 to 300 parents attending.

And what a beautiful rose garden of color. I did not know Milwaukee had that many whites, Hispanics, Asians, and Indian people until we started calling our meetings. They all came to our meetings, because these people cared. And the schools are racially integrated. We did not have any law that you have to have racial balance. We didn't even include that in the bill. In fact, my friends were saying that we had to make sure that the schools were racially balanced. I said, "No, these schools are not under court order and we are not letting you put them under court order, because these schools focus on education, not desegregation transportation."

We are going to educate these kids. We don't care what color they are. We are not counting to see how many blacks, how many whites, how many Asians and how many Indians. Race has got nothing to do with what we have to do. The public schools are too busy counting to see how many blacks and how many whites are enrolled.

Everything is based on how to get more money to the bureaucracy, not on how to educate the children. This situation is sustaining the tension between races. Milwaukee has also been designated as one of the most racist cities in the country. It is things like racial quotas in the schools that are creating that problem, because they make decisions based exclusively on the race of a child. How do you think a parent feels when they tell him that his child is the wrong color and

that is why that child cannot get into a good school? We have a 30 percent white population, so that leftover 70 percent is constantly running, fighting, chasing, and worrying about how to get into a good school. That does not make sense.

The educrats and socialcrats who are making those decisions do not have their children in public schools. Their children are enrolled safely in private or parochial schools. But these officials are experimenting with all of our lives, but only as long as their kids are safely away. They are messing with our kids.

Breaking the Mold. And so, we have to stop all those kind of decisions that erode and harm our community. That is one of the reasons why I am running for County Executive. The polls are showing that I am gaining. I have more name recognition than the other four guys. The choice bill is what gave me this—everybody knows Polly. I have some of these white people, white males—the most unlikely people—pushing Polly Williams. They like what I did with the choice program. They like the fact that I was able to pull together the kind of coalition that we did based on the issue. Everything was focused on the needs of the people. I am not a system's person; I am not a bureaucrat, I work outside of the bureaucracy. Even my party has a problem with me. You need somebody who is not a part of the bureaucracy to break the mold. I have already demonstrated that I will break the mold, that I will make decisions based on the needs of the people, that I listen to the people. I do not care about the system or the bureaucracy; if it is not working I will break it down.

I understand that my party is trying to reapportion me out of my district. My district right now is about 91 percent black, and of course the voters keep returning me. Reapportionment has made my district 64 percent black, but white voters are supporting me in spite of my big mouth.

I have learned that you have got to seize the time, you have to be able to act, and if you listen to what people are saying, you will act right. Everything that we have done in this fight and struggle to get the choice bill passed worked because we listened to the people. It was important that we hear the parents, and I heard them. I know; I live with the parents. I understand their pain. I know as a parent myself how it feels to be helpless and not in control of what happens to your children and yourself.

Any time we can empower parents, empower people, that is more important than anything. And when we start talking about the government, we forget that we are the ones who vote for those who pass the laws. Look, if it is a bad law and it is impacting negatively on us, the elected officials had better change it or we are going to change them. We have to make things work for ourselves, because in the end it comes down to you and your family and what is happening to you at home. You cannot sit around and wait for somebody else to come and make things better for you. You have to get into that race right away and stand up and fight.

Our children, particularly low-income, ethnic minority children, need to see their parents in responsible, powerful positions, so they can feel better about themselves. Every chance I get I make sure the kids in my neighborhood see me standing tall and arguing and fighting to let them know I am standing up for them. When I come home they say, "Miss Polly, I saw you on television." It is very seldom that kids from my neighborhood can look at television or read a newspaper and see people that they know; so they feel good about seeing their neighbor. Or when I come home and I have loads of groceries, the kids all converge on me, "Miss Polly, let me take your groceries in." They are really proud and happy to be able to do something to help people.

We have got to have these to be models for our kids, but more important, we have to have parents in charge of their children. The only way the problems in the schools are going to change is if parents take charge and take their rightful position as the authority over their children. The bu-

reaucracy is supposed to do what parents want, not parents doing what the bureaucracy wants. We have to stop handing our children over to bureaucrats or people who decide to pass laws based on their needs and families. The parental choice bill that we passed is a bill that helped parents get involved with their kids, because parents made a commitment to help their children. The public schools were not helping parents and these private, non-sectarian schools are.

Top of the Class. If any of you saw "60 Minutes," you saw little Larry. Larry did return. He returned to Urban Day in September 1991 where he was a 1.0 student. He did not want to leave with a 1.5 average. He is now a 4.0 student. He wanted to leave that school at the top of the class. Little Larry has had four offers of scholarships to pay for his college education. Well, little Larry is set, there is money now to help him.

We have a lot of students like little Larry in these inner-city schools, and we need opportunity and choice for these students. We need to aim everything we do, and make all resources available, to save our children. Because if we don't put the emphasis and focus on our children, none of us are safe. Parents have the right to decide on the quality and the type of education their children receive. If their kids need a private, parochial, independent school education, they have the right to make that decision and their taxpayer dollars ought to go where they want their children educated, and not to some bureaucracy that says they know better.

