

NAACP Response
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It's Time to Empower Low-Income Parents

By Howard Fuller

When President Bush recently addressed the NAACP, his praise for charter schools and other forms of education choice was met with a mixed chorus of boos and applause.

That mixed reaction is indicative of an increasingly pitched debate in the black community, between those who want to save the traditional public school system and those who stress giving low income and working class black families other options. I have no doubt that the people who booed the president have as much concern as I do about the tragic and unacceptable non-education of thousands of our children. But I stand with those who are making an urgent priority of educating children from low income and working class families – those whom the current system has so often failed.

Our poorest children are being denied a quality education in so many places in this country. While their futures are being snuffed out, too many of us who are able to access quality options for our own children are questioning the idea of empowering poor families by making these very same options available to them.

There's no question that parents who gain the power to choose take advantage of those opportunities. According to the latest federal data, 57% students in public charter schools are minority, compared to 39% in the general public-ed population. In big urban centers the numbers are much higher: 99 percent of charter-school students in the District of Columbia are children of color, as are 91% of Chicago charter school students and 96% of charter attendees in New York City. Choice initiatives in DC, Milwaukee, and other cities overwhelmingly serve African American students.

It's not hard to understand why many organizations and individuals in our community are either hostile or indifferent to charter schools and other forms of parental choice. Big-city school systems have historically employed large numbers of African-Americans, and for most of us the traditional public school has been our only hope for receiving an education. The traditional system has served many of us well. **But that was then and this is now.** Today's public school systems are still employing us, but too few are effectively educating our children.

To their credit, two of our main line civil right organizations have taken some steps toward recognizing the reality of parental choice. There's an approving reference to charter schools, for example, in the NAACP's "Brown 50 Years and Beyond" report, proposing them as one means of advancing desegregation goals. And while the national

Urban League's education agenda promotes achievement through mentoring and other means, Urban League affiliates in Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and other cities are more attuned to parent choice and have even founded charter schools of their own.

Some local and state leaders have gone farther. Colorado state representative Terrance Carroll, and State Senators David Patterson and Malcolm Smith have fought courageously for charter schools. Rep. Dwight Evans and Senator Tony Williams in Pennsylvania have taken up the cause of charters, tax credits and the state takeover of Philadelphia Public Schools, Newark Mayor Cory Booker has stood strong for various forms of parental choice. State Representatives Ted Haskins and Rodney Hubbard In Missouri, State Representative Jason Fields in Wisconsin and State Senator Al Lawson in Florida have supported parental choice initiatives in their respective states. All of these courageous elected officials have endured the wrath of the teachers unions and members of their own party because they dare to support empowering low income and working class parents to choose the best educational environment for their children.

Some argue that choice serves only a portion of the population, and that we should expend all our resources on a system that – presumably – serves all. I think we should take a lesson from Harriet Tubman's fight against slavery. She fought everyday to end it, but as she waged that battle, she set out to free as many slaves as possible. I believe we must work hard to improve the traditional public education system in this country, but in the mean time, we have a moral responsibility to rescue as many of children as we can "by any means necessary."

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