

Pell Grants for Kids

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Testimony

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Ellen Goldring and I am the Alexander Heard Distinguished Service Professor and Professor of Education Policy and Leadership at Vanderbilt University. I appreciate the opportunity to share my views about the Pell Grants for Kids, particularly as they relate to school choice. In my testimony today I will first provide a brief overview of school choice and then discuss possible benefits associated with the Pell Grants for Kids and raise some areas of concern.

Decades of school choice research has documented two very clear, consistent findings that pertain to our discussion today about Pell Grants for Kids: First, school choice is associated with high levels of parent involvement, commitment and empowerment. Second, school choice policies must address questions of equity that often emerge because of differential access to information and transportation between advantaged and disadvantaged families. I will briefly follow these two themes and discuss their implications for Pell Grants for Kids.

Background

One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children's education is through choosing the school they attend. Parents typically choose a school de facto, according to where they live. However, within the past decade, more parents are able to exercise explicit school choice because of specific educational policies, such as magnet schools, charter schools, open enrollment, tax credits and vouchers.

School choice is a highly debated and disputed policy. Many believe school choice policies will harm the public schools, leaving them with lower enrollments and fewer resources to meet the needs of all children. Others believe school choice is exactly what is needed to spur public educational monopolies to excellence. Regardless of the contested nature of the costs and benefits of school choice, and the debated empirical findings about its impact on student achievement, the fact is, the educational landscape in this country will continue to include many more school choice options in the future. In my opinion, the most prevalent school choice options will always be in the public school arena, including open enrollment, magnet schools, and charter schools, while private school choice, involving vouchers and tax credits, will continue to impact fewer children.

Public school choice has been given new prominence by the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires that students in failing schools be given the option to transfer to more successful schools in their districts. This is in keeping with other provisions of the act that

seek to strengthen accountability in public education. The prospect of losing students is meant to operate as a sanction to spur failing schools to improve. However, this is not the only purpose served by this provision of the law. Advocates of expanded choice in public education do not see choice merely as a sanction. Choice is also viewed as a mechanism for creating more successful schools, particularly in disadvantaged communities where parents cannot choose better schools by changing residential location.

Benefits of school choice include: (1) greater parent and student satisfaction, and increased parent commitment and involvement, fostered by an enhanced sense of ownership; (2) greater school autonomy, stronger school leadership, and enhanced teacher collaboration and professionalism; and (3) enhanced sense of school community because of shared values among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and staff. In short, choice is seen as a mechanism for establishing strong, successful schools in communities that have too often lacked them.

All school choice policies face challenges pertaining to excellence, equity, and access. Schools are faced with recruiting and attracting a student body that is both racially and socioeconomically diverse. Much research has suggested that choice ‘creams’ parents from upper social class families because these families have access to information and networks that help them manage and navigate the school choice process. The challenges of equity and access are even more poignant today as many districts are no longer under court order to maintain certain racial quotas due to unitary status agreements. Educational outcomes become more unequal as parents with time, interest, and knowledge take advantage of choice while students whose parents are less involved, have less information, or are less able to make good use of these opportunities, do not.

In sum, one of the key benefits of school choice is the provision of matching students and families with the appropriate school. There is no longer a prevailing belief that there is one system that can meet the needs of all children. The ‘one best system’ approach to education or the common-schooling view that all students must participate in the same type of education, cannot meet the current needs of society.

Pell Grants for Kids would most likely be used by public school parents to purchase educational services both in and out of school, rather than as a voucher for parents to choose a private school, unless the parents were already at a private school. Pell Grants for Kids is too small to be considered an avenue for widespread school choice. Five hundred dollars can be helpful as a grant to buy needed educational services, but it is too small an amount to help a low-income child attend a private school, unless it is an inexpensive parochial school.

#### Possible Benefits:

Pell Grants for Kids could provide low income parents access to educational opportunities for their children. One obvious difference between upper and lower income families is the amount of disposable income each can spend on educational services and supports for their children. This disposable income is used both as a ‘private good’ for a

parent's own child and as a pooled resource with other middle income families from the same school. For example, more-advantaged families often hire tutors or SAT/ACT coaches to assist their children in preparing for college. The growth of Sylvan Learning and Kaplan Test Prep across the country, not to mention music lessons, dance lessons and other after school activities, evidences this divide. Furthermore, it is not at all unusual for the Parent/Teacher Organization of advantaged schools to raise over \$100,000 each year from parent donations. These monies are then used to 'buy' supplemental educational programs for all the children in the school. Many elementary schools buy a foreign language teacher to offer Spanish in the early grades or buy additional music and art programs beyond what the district typically provides. Pell Grants could help provide additional 'disposable' educational resources for disadvantaged children.

Pell Grants for Kids could empower parents and help them become more involved in their children's education. Research on school choice documents that parents engaged in school choice are more involved in their children's schools than parents who do not choose. This is a very consistent finding across all different types of school choice, private and public. Parents may be more comfortable with, and supportive of a school they have chosen. Furthermore, after exercising choice, they may have the desire to prove to themselves that they made a wise decision and, therefore, parents may be willing to be more involved in the school. Parents who choose a school may be more committed to try to influence school policies to ensure that the school remains consistent and congruent with their values.

Similar to these benefits from school choice, the Pell Grants for Kids may provide an avenue to help spur parent involvement. The Grant may provide disadvantaged parents with a meaningful mechanism to get involved as they decide when and how to spend the grant. Once making their choice, they may continue to stay involved to monitor their choice.

Pell Grants for Kids target students and families who typically have the fewest choices. Disadvantaged families and children do not usually have a wide array of educational choices—they tend to attend schools with high concentrations of poverty. Research evidence that spans several decades shows a persistent relationship between the percent of at-risk students in a school and the financial resources allocated to it in terms of class size, age and condition of facilities, teacher-student ratios, teacher quality, and per-pupil expenditures. Researchers and commentators on public education have argued that the socioeconomic isolation of poor, minority students in schools is a prime cause of the continuing achievement gap. Pell Grants for Kids could help provide important resources to schools serving at-risk students by targeting families that are in need and typically do not have choices regarding educational services and programs.

Pell Grants for Kids follow the student and could spur increased options. When we speak about school choice, especially school choice for poor and disadvantaged students, we must consider both supply and demand. Pell Grants for Kids could help influence the supply side—that is, they may serve as an incentive for schools, even public schools, to recruit and retain disadvantaged children. With the choice option under NCLB, the Pell

Grants could serve as an added incentive for schools to work with disadvantaged student groups. In addition, the grants may help receiving schools or existing schools offer the specific services and programs students and parents need or want. The grant may also act as an incentive for schools to begin to engage and respond to disadvantaged parents much more seriously.

Possible Challenges:

Access to information about Pell Grants could be difficult: One lesson we have learned, repeatedly, about school choice programs is the importance of access to information. To facilitate a system of school choice, or in this case Pell Grants, parents and families must have information that is both accessible and understandable and that allows all parents, not just the most sophisticated or well-educated parents, to make informed decisions about how to acquire and spend the grant. Multiple and varied avenues of communication are important. Individual families can make good choices regarding the various alternatives open to them for their children's education if they have sufficient information to judge those alternatives.

Lack of access to information is one of the major sources of inequity under most school choice plans. Economically disadvantaged families, those targeted to receive the Pell Grants for Kids, often do not have adequate information, may not be aware of their options, and may not have the formal and informal networks to learn about alternatives, despite outreach and dissemination efforts.

Parents' social networks play a central and fundamental role in the sources and types of information available to parents to make school choices. Social networks are directly related to social class. In other words social networks are related to occupational status, neighborhood stability and isolation, and membership in recreational and community organizations. Disadvantaged parents and those of more advantaged backgrounds have access to different social networks and use different types of information. Upper social class parents enjoy wider social networks with more people who have access to information. For lower-income parents the word-of-mouth channel is the key source of information compared to the more deliberate district and school-level information dissemination activities, such as mailings, meetings and media outreach. For example, we often find in our research on magnet schools that parents continue to think that magnet schools are 'private' schools.

As a result of the relationship between social-class structure (i.e., education, occupation, income, housing) and social networks, the pool of resources from which lower-income parents can draw to make decisions regarding Pell Grants for Kids may be somewhat smaller than the one available to middle and upper class parents. This is especially true for parents who are not employed, did not finish high school or never attended college, and live in unstable and transient neighborhoods. In the absence of the type of social networks that can deliver relevant and valuable information regarding grant options, applications and deadlines, lower-income parents may be left out. Therefore, it is vitally important that a broad approach be implemented to providing information.

Determining eligibility for Pell Grants for Kids by using Free and Reduced Lunch Applications may under fund the initiative in some grades. Relying on free and reduced lunch forms may not be the best way to register for the Pell Grants. In most schools, as children become older then tend to shy away from self-identifying for the Free/Reduced Lunch programs. This tendency could deny many eligible children the benefits of the program.

Access to transportation could be an impediment to utilizing Pell Grants for Kids. Expanding choice options requires access to transportation for disadvantaged families and students. Lack of transportation is often one of the most widespread barriers to school choice and participation in after-school and other types of enrichment activities. Those most in need of Pell Grants are also likely to be those families that do not have access to safe and reliable transportation.

Transportation is central to access because many disadvantaged schools are located in high-risk neighborhoods with few community and educational resources. Many impoverished neighborhoods may not have a large number of agencies that can offer Pell Grant services, including services provided by nonprofit, community, civic, and religious organizations. Some urban planners have referred to communities with little or no assets as 'no-zones' - "no banks, no grocery stores, no community services, no hospitals" (Greenberg & Schneider, 1994, as cited in Noguera, 2001, p. 196). How will parents be able to use their Pell Grants if they live in 'no-zones'?

Parents could be co-opted when using Pell Grants for Kids: For parents whose school experiences were unhappy, unsuccessful and painful, parents may not feel comfortable engaging in discussion, negotiation or exchange around using their Pell Grants, especially if they want services or programs that are different from what school personnel advocate. School professionals may try to influence how the families spend their grants in order to support existing or new school initiatives. How will parents ensure that their grants are not co-opted by the school?

Under NCLB, students in Title I schools who did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress for three consecutive years are eligible for Supplemental Educational Services. These services are paid to providers by the Local Education Authority from Title I NCLB funds. How will these funds and services provided under NCLB be juxtaposed and differentiated by Pell Grants for Kids to ensure parents are in the drivers' seat and are making the decisions?

Furthermore, the idea that the funding from Pell Grants for Kids could be pooled together by parents at the same school assumes a level of parent organization and communication that often does not exist in low-income, disadvantaged schools. Who will organize the parents? How? Many schools with at-risk children do not have high levels of parental involvement and do not have well established parent organizations. Some schools have Parent Outreach coordinators or Parent Resource Centers, but many do not. In absence of mechanisms to support parents, it is not clear how Pell Grants for Kids can empower them.

Evidence and experience suggest that the outcomes associated with school choice are dependent upon carefully crafted and implemented policies. I urge the committee to consider the potential challenges that may face the Pell Grants for Kids program as well as strategies that can help the program achieve its intended goals.

I would be glad to furnish references at the committee staff's request. Thank-you again for the opportunity to present testimony on this very timely and important topic.