

Pell Grants for Kids

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Witness:

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Testimony

Good morning. I am John Kirtley, and the first thing I want to tell you this morning is that I am not truly qualified to talk to you about this subject. I am an inadequate messenger for the thousands of low income parents that I have worked with in my home state of Florida and across the country who desire educational freedom and opportunity for their children. Only those low income parents could truly describe to you their desire for educational freedom. But I will do my best.

In 1998 I helped create a privately funded scholarship program for low income families in the Tampa Bay area. The scholarships paid up to \$1,500 per year towards private school tuition. We intentionally made this a difficult program for parents; they had to pay a significant amount of their own money to make use of the scholarships. We did no advertising; we simply visited churches and housing projects and talked about the program. In four months we received over 12,000 applications for 700 scholarships.

I was stunned by this response. I was stunned that families with incomes well under \$20,000 would make tremendous financial sacrifices to be able to send their children to the school of their own choice.

I am myself a product of the Florida public schools, and I had a wonderful experience. Most children do—but not all. The challenges facing low income families in today's schools has been well documented and debated. Where there can be no debate is the desire of low income parents for more choices.

My experience with the scholarship program in Florida was duplicated in cities across the country. The Children's Scholarship Fund, which helped create xx private scholarship programs across the country in 1998, received 1.2 million applications from low income families for 20,000 partial scholarships. In Baltimore over 30% of the families of public school children applied for a scholarship.

I am currently Vice Chairman of the Alliance For School Choice, a nonprofit organization that works to bring educational freedom to low income families across the country. Our organization believes that every parent, not just those with enough money, should be able to choose the best school for their children. School choice already exists today—if you have enough money. Parents with adequate means either move to a neighborhood with good public schools, or they pay for tuition to a private school. It is only those parents without the means who can't make a choice.

Some blame the low graduation rates in our low income areas on the inherent difficulties of poverty. There are some who say that low income parents either don't know enough, or don't care enough, to choose the right school for their children. In working with thousands of these parents, I have found just the opposite to be true. The low income parents know that education is the only way for their children to have a better life than they themselves have known. They are prepared to make tremendous sacrifices in order to be able to choose their children's schools.

With our scholarships these low income parents have been empowered for the first time to do what is best for their children. The scholarships are given to children, not schools—which means they are completely portable to another private school. These parents are demanding consumers, and they do not hesitate to find use the scholarship at a different school if they are not satisfied.

This debate should not be about “public schools” vs. “private schools”. We should be less concerned about the system and more concerned about the children. Perhaps it is time to re-examine our definition of “public education”. Is it a guaranteed seat in a government run, government owned school assigned to you by your zip code? Is this the best definition for success? Perhaps “public education” should be defined as using taxpayer dollars to educate children in the best way possible. If we agree with that definition, who will decide what is the best way? And the best place? My experience has taught me that parents are the best party to make that decision.

I wish to urge one major change in the proposed legislation. I do not believe \$500 is enough to make a difference for these families. It is not enough to allow low income parents to truly make a choice. I would change the bill to allow the \$500 tax credits to be aggregated by nonprofit scholarship funds that serve low income children. This way, the individual contributions could be combined to offer scholarships in the amount necessary to make tuition payments affordable for low income families. I would also allow the scholarships to be used to pay for transportation costs to a different public school. The point of this legislation is not to say that private schools are better than public schools. There are good schools and bad schools in both categories. The point of this bill is to help low income families gain access to the right school, whether it be public or private.

This legislation, if modified as I suggested, would empower low income parents to make that decision. It would be a small but important step towards addressing the inequities that currently exist in education today.

Empowering low income parents with school choice is not the only answer to what ails today's system of public education. However, it is a vital and necessary one. We need the power of parental choice as one of the tools in the toolbox of reform.

Some will argue that a program such as this should not exist until public schools receive more money. Yet we see cities like Newark and Washington DC, which have the highest per pupil expenditures and the lowest graduation rates in the country. It is time we try something new—empowering low income parents with school choice.

Again let me apologize for being an inadequate messenger for all of those whom I represent here today. I could never do justice to their desire to do what is best for their children. I wish the millions of parents who applied for a scholarship could be here today to tell you why they did. I believe we have no greater crisis in this country than the inequities that exist in K-12 education. I urge you to take a small step towards erasing those inequities with this program. Thank you.