

Written Testimony  
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“Exploring State Success in Expanding Parent and Student Options”

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Education and the Workforce Committee

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Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Kildee, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify today. As a long-time supporter of parental choice and empowerment, I am pleased that Congress is interested in delving deeper into this very important issue.

I am a founding board member and senior advisor to the American Federation for Children (AFC), the nation’s leading advocacy organization promoting school choice. AFC works to promote the benefits of – and the need for – school choice via vouchers, scholarship tax credits, and education savings account programs. We are also strong supporters of public school choice, charter schools, as well as virtual schools, homeschooling, and magnet schools. Ultimately, we seek to advance public policy that empowers parents, particularly those in low income families, to choose the education they determine is best for their children. As a former member of the Council of the District of Columbia and Chair of the Council's Education Committee, I was at the forefront of the growth of the charter school sector here in D.C., as well as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, a voucher program that allows low-income parents to choose the school that best fits their child’s needs.

Parental choice is the very definition of parental engagement. Choice empowers parents to decide what educational delivery system – be it traditional public school, charter school, or private school – best meets the specific needs of their child. Choice programs all across the country show that parental engagement via school choice improves educational outcomes for participating students, puts students in safer schools, and gives parents more satisfaction with their child’s learning environments.

This powerful form of parental engagement is catching on in states nationwide. The 2011 and 2012 state legislative sessions have given rise to a large crop of new private school choice programs in a diverse sampling of states. Seven new private school choice programs were enacted in 2011, and two additional programs were signed into law already this year. Fully one third of the current 29 private school choice programs were enacted in the past year and a half. Parents, education reformers, and state and local elected officials across the country are recognizing that parental choice makes sense for families in their states. One third of the

nation's state legislative chambers passed school choice legislation creating new programs and expanding existing ones over the past 17 months.

Allow me to share a few highlights about just a few of the many private school choice programs operating today:

### *Louisiana*

I am proud to say that I was able to play a role in securing the 2008 enactment of the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, a voucher program in New Orleans for low-income families in failing schools. Four consecutive studies assessing parental satisfaction showed remarkably consistent and high praise from parents with children enrolled in the program, as no fewer than 93 percent of parents continued to be "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their child's voucher school.

Just fewer than 2,000 students participate in that program, but now, thanks to recent action by the state legislature and the governor, the highly-successful program has been expanded to the rest of the state. Our work with key legislators and the substantial grassroots groundwork done over a period of several years has resulted in making nearly 400,000 students eligible for the statewide program beginning next year, thanks to the strong bipartisan majority that approved the voucher expansion last month.

### *Florida Tax Credit Scholarship*

But the successes in Louisiana were made possible in part because of the prior work in many other states around the country. Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship was enacted in 2001 and today serves nearly 40,000 students statewide. Thanks to donations from businesses and corporations, a nonprofit organization can provide scholarships for children in low-income families to attend the private school of their parents' choice. Students in the program come from families with an average household income of just over \$24,000, and over half of the participants are from single parent households. Some 34 percent of participants are African-American and another 34 percent are Hispanic.

The results have shown the program to be a resounding success. A state-commissioned researcher at Northwestern University found that scholarship students tended to be among the lowest-performing students in their prior public school, but once in the program they performed just as well or better on academic assessments than students nationally. It is important to note that these national comparisons pertain to all students nationally, and not just low-income students. In addition, the same researcher conducted another state sanctioned study that showed that the Florida program led to standardized test score gains in the public schools most likely to lose students to private schools. Through parental engagement for the state's most disadvantaged families, we are seeing improved academic outcomes for everyone. It's a reality that transcends party lines and ideological divides, as just last year, we saw 46 percent of the Florida Democratic legislative caucus vote to dramatically expand the program.

### *D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*

Much of my work over the past seven years has been related to the successful passage and implementation of the program here in D.C., the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. And I'm proud to say that we're seeing similarly successful outcomes here in our nation's capital. A 2010 study from the U. S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences found that students who used opportunity scholarships graduated at a rate of 91 percent, 21 percentage points higher than those interested in the program who did not receive a scholarship. The D.C. voucher participant graduation rate is over 30 percent higher than the graduation rate of students in D.C. Public Schools. In 2009, the study determined that the program boosted student reading scores, as the use of a scholarship increased reading achievement by an extra 3.7 months of learning over three years. This program is truly an example of parents being intimately involved in their children's education and the long-term positive effects it can have on those children's lives. In fact, four consecutive studies from Georgetown University and the University of Arkansas found that D.C. parents were very satisfied, more involved in their children's education, and becoming savvy educational consumers.

### *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*

In developing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, much inspiration came from the nation's oldest and largest voucher program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Enacted in 1990, it has grown from serving 337 students in its first year to now having more than 23,000 participating students during the 2011-12 school year. This form of parental empowerment in Milwaukee has also resulted in positive educational outcomes for participating students. A 2012 "gold standard" evaluation found that the on-time graduation rate for students in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) was 7 percentage points higher than the graduation rate of students in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The study also found that students participating in the Milwaukee voucher program are more likely than their public school peers to enroll in a four-year college and persist in college. The University of Arkansas researchers that have evaluated the program every year since 2008 examined "virtually every possible way that school choice could systematically affect people, schools, and neighborhoods in Milwaukee and found no evidence of any harmful effects of choice."

Let me share with you an example of how parental involvement is encouraged by private schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. One participating school, a faith-based elementary school, excels at providing opportunities for parents to get involved. At this school the parent attendance rate at parent teacher conferences is typically 100 percent. Parents are encouraged to get involved with school life, for example, by volunteering for lunchroom duty, supervising student clubs, assisting in the school library, helping to organize fundraisers such as the school auction, or serving on an advisory board known as the Education Committee. Parent volunteer hours are incentivized but not required. According to the principal of this school these opportunities for parent involvement all contribute to the development of a strong school culture that fosters academic growth.

## *Arizona's Education Savings Accounts*

But if the aforementioned programs have done wonders to increase parental engagement, a new program enacted last year in Arizona has truly shifted the power of educational decision-making back into the hands of the parents. Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) were enacted in Arizona last year and will likely be seriously considered by other states in the future. These programs create personal accounts that store a child's state education dollars. These funds can be used for a variety of educational options, including private school tuition and fees, textbooks, tutoring, and even future college tuition payments. With ESAs, it is truly the parent who determines how state funding is spent for their children's education.

The first such program, Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, is in its very first year of implementation. This particular program is tailored to students who have a disability or who are eligible to receive special education services from a school district under state law. With this program, 90 percent of state funding for each qualified student is deposited in an account that the student's parents control. The overall amount takes into account each child's grade and disability. If there is leftover money in a child's account after high school, the funds can be used for postsecondary education. Nearly 150 students participated in the first year of the program, and the Arizona legislature recently passed a bill that expands eligibility for ESAs to students in D and F schools, children of active duty military, and children who have been in foster care and have either been adopted or permanently placed.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that there is now a wealth of evidence, from multiple scientifically valid studies to parental satisfaction rates to the personal testimony of the thousands of parents I've encountered across the country that shows without a doubt that private school choice leads to positive educational outcomes for students. The reason is that parents are often best suited to choose the schooling environment that best meets their child's needs. Parents across the country deserve the option of participating in the most powerful form of parental engagement: choosing where their child attends school every day.

States are increasingly recognizing this, as evidenced by the large number of new and expanded programs all over the country. No one knows an individual child and his or her learning styles better than a parent. We owe it to every parent to provide them with the tools that will allow their child to succeed. Through parental choice and expanded educational options nationwide, we can work towards finally living up to our promise to give children all across America access to the quality education they deserve.