

FOCUS[®]

The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

VOUCHER DEBATE CHANGES VENUE

*State, Local Officials
Now Can Decide*

By Michael Fletcher

No sooner had the Supreme Court issued its landmark ruling upholding the Cleveland school voucher program, than House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) revived a proposal to introduce vouchers to public schools in the District of Columbia.

Armey's measure had failed in the past, but now, he said, the Supreme Court had declared a new day. With that, he predicted, his proposal would soon become law.

Armey was among a cadre of school voucher proponents who predicted that the June Supreme Court ruling would open the door for a spate of voucher programs nationwide. But in reality, the ruling likely will have a more modest effect. While voucher proposals are sure to proliferate in the wake of the ruling, proponents have many local battles to wage before state lawmakers and the general public embrace what is undoubtedly the nation's most contentious school choice option.

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Perspective

The Continuing Impact of 9/11

The stunning reverberations of 9/11, as the 2001 terrorist attacks have come to be known, continue to haunt Americans in ways we could never have imagined. They are directly connected to the disruption to our economy, uncertainty in national security and increased fear for our personal security.

But most importantly, the September 11 tragedies and their aftermath have severely tested the American character.

This test raises important questions. What have we done to make some people hate us so much? What can we do to protect ourselves from such unspeakable terrorism? Have we become more suspicious of and unilateral in our dealings with other nations? Has the American melting pot been stirred and scooped up in portions that reflect new forms of discrimination and bias? Are our democratic values losing ground to short-sighted and exaggerated claims about what is needed to fight the war on terrorism? Is our singular focus on Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein blinding us to new threats and opportunities?

We might not like the answers we get to these and other questions you can pose, but now more than ever we need this type of thorough self-examination.

A year later, we are in some ways less clear about our identity than we were before the terrorists struck. Could that be because the democratic rights and values that have made our nation a truly great society are being trampled by our search for revenge. Are our liberties being sacrificed as the collateral damage of the war on terrorism?

The injury to American values is a far more serious matter than the inconvenience of delayed travel caused by the needed increase in airport security. Studies by national and international organizations have found a serious weakening of human rights in the country that sets itself as the standard bearer. A Human Rights Watch report released last month found that the U.S. "has witnessed a persistent, deliberate, and unwarranted erosion of basic rights against abusive governmental power that are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and international human rights law."

The erosion of rights isn't limited to the actions of an ultra-conservative attorney general. Congress passed the USA-Patriot Act, which in several ways undercuts judicial review, the basic protector of Constitutional rights. Among other things, it allows certain suspects to be held for seven days without seeing a judge and provides for the potential indefinite confinement of non-citizens.

Furthermore, Attorney General John Ashcroft asserts a right to indefinitely detain American citizens whom the government classifies as enemy combatants. The government contends they can be held without charge or access to lawyers. The Justice Department also says the enemy combatant classification is not subject to meaningful judicial review. This and other extraordinary claims of power should not be allowed to stand.

Fortunately, a federal appeals court in Cincinnati stood up for the Constitution when it ruled last month that the administration's practice of holding secret deportation hearings for non-citizens rounded up in the post September 11 dragnet is unconstitutional. "Democracies die behind closed doors," Judge Damon Keith wrote in the unanimous opinion.

Let there be no mistake: Because of September 11, the administration and Congress are right to wage a vigorous war on terrorism. But there also should be no doubt that the rights and values that make America great must not be sacrificed in the process. ■

Eddie N. Williams
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MAGAZINE

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ON THE Washington, D.C.'s Strange Mayoral Race WRITE TRACK

BY JONETTA ROSE BARRAS

Washington, D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams is taking his “Do the Write Thing,” campaign to every neighborhood of the nation’s capital, as he tries to recover from a petition debacle that resulted in his exclusion from the September Democratic Primary ballot.

The final blow in Williams’ summer ballot battle came when the D.C. Court of Appeals upheld a decision by the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics. It ruled that the more than 500 pages of qualifying petitions filed by the mayor’s reelection committee were fraught with so many forgeries it was impossible for him to have 2,000 valid signatures, out of more than 10,000 he submitted, as required by law. The Elections Board fined the mayor’s campaign \$277,700.

While distancing himself from the actions—some of which may have been illegal—of members of his campaign staff, Williams fought to secure his place on the ballot. But when it looked as if the odds weren’t in his favor, and the city’s Office of Campaign Finance ruled that if he didn’t run as a Democrat he might be compelled to return more than \$1 million in contributions, he decided to launch his unprecedented effort to win the Democratic primary as a write-in candidate.

Howard University political scientist Alvin Thornton says Williams’ reelection committee took “the requirement of democratic participation for granted.... Looking at the big picture, there are few places where the average citizen intersects with power. Those petitions were that intersection.”

If Williams didn’t understand that before the petition scandal, he is acting as if he understands it now. He sent out more than 77,000 letters to registered Democrats personally apologizing for the “poor

judgment and inexcusable actions of my early campaign organization.... In no way do I condone or excuse any unethical or illegal actions...”

Williams isn’t the only politico suffering ballot headaches. In Wisconsin, fifth term State Senator Gary George was already campaigning to be the state’s first African American governor when accusations surfaced about widespread forgeries on his qualifying petitions. When the counting was complete, he was only seven signatures short of the required 2,000, but the elections board voted 7 to 1 to keep him off the ballot.

Howard University’s Alvin Thornton says Williams’ reelection committee took “the requirement of democratic participation for granted.”

“Nobody else’s papers were subjected to the kind of scrutiny that Sen. George’s was,” said John Savage, after casting the lone dissenting vote on July 31.

Back in Washington, the would-be shoo-in incumbent, with a \$1.4 million war chest, a fairly decent record of achievement and only token opposition, appeared to be sabotaging his own reelection bid. First there was the decision by campaign workers to violate local regulations and drive steel stakes into a main street in order to erect a tent for the kick-off ceremony. That resulted in the mayor’s own Department of Transportation fining his reelection committee \$2,500. Then came the historic petition scandal.

It is puzzling that Williams is fighting for his political life. Soon after his appointment by then-Mayor Marion S. Barry Jr. as the city’s first independent chief financial officer, he was heralded for his handling of the District’s fiscal woes. As a testimonial of their gratitude, in 1998, local citizens launched an unprecedented draft movement that vaulted Williams into the political arena. He handily won the hotly contested Democratic nomination, beating out three long-serving city council members. In the general election, he slaughtered a popular Republican opponent, causing her to declare she would never run again in a mayoral race.

His tenure, however, has been a tableau of unimagined brilliance and unbridled bumbling. He helped usher a downtown boom that includes the construction of a state-of-the-art convention center, luxury residential housing, major hotels and office buildings. He lured The Newseum, a media museum, to relocate from northern Virginia, and persuaded big retailer Home Depot to locate in one of the city’s commercially neglected neighborhoods.

Additionally, he oversaw the completion and opening of an impressive youth learning and tennis center in the city’s largely poor and Black Southeast quadrant, which had not had a new recreational facility in more than a decade. He snagged federal money to build hundreds of low and moderate-income homes in once blighted neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River. And he pushed through changes in the governance structure of the city’s school system, launching a new round of education reforms, some of which have already produced results.

“The District is better off today than it was four years ago,” Williams declares at

every campaign stop, adding that he is “the right man; the city is going in the right direction.”

His record of accomplishments contrasts sharply with examples of incompetence and inexperience that have sadly visited his administration since his inauguration in 1999. The petition catastrophe is only the latest example. Others center on management and ethics.

Consider the appointments Williams has made during his tenure, many of which seemed doomed from the beginning. Christopher Lynn, selected to head the D.C. Taxicab Commission, had just arrived in town to make his round of courtesy visits when Williams staffers suddenly realized that his highly publicized and troublesome career in New York City included allegations of corruption that might jeopardize his nomination. Then there was Robert Newman, the head of the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation, who exaggerated his previous experiences on his resume and was forced to resign. In July 2002, Fire Chief Ronnie Few was forced out for the same reason, along with three of his top, hand-picked aides.

And there was the mayor’s political use of government workers on government time — a violation of the federal Hatch Act — to campaign for a referendum sponsored by him and the D.C. Council. The referendum measure changed the city’s board of education from an all-elected body to a hybrid that included five elected and four appointed individuals. The committee that was set up by the mayor to push the referendum was hit with a fine for violating the city’s elections laws.

Earlier this year, a report by the city’s independent Inspector General found that the mayor’s staff, including his deputy chief of staff and possibly his chief of staff, solicited money from corporations and individuals, some of whom were doing business with the city government—a violation of city law—to fund various activities that purported to benefit charitable organizations doing work in the community. However, the inspector

general concluded that many of the functions appeared to be “little more than social functions hosted by the mayor for prominent political, business, and community leaders as well as government officials. As such, these events may be interpreted as being beneficial to the mayor’s candidacy for re-election.”

Though these scandals were relatively small compared to others in Washington, Howard University’s Thornton says, “crime or corruption is a symptom of the bureaucracy being lazy and not focused on making sure people are served.”

Not serving “the people” — that is, lower-income Black people — is, perhaps, the chief complaint against Williams. But when his critics are asked to cite examples, invariably they focus on the dismantling of

There is no denying that the petition scandal has severely damaged Williams’ image. Although he is predicted to win reelection, the next four years won’t be easy.

D.C. General, the city’s only public hospital, which was more than 100 years old and located east of the river. The hospital isn’t fully closed, but it has reduced emergency and in-patient services in return for a more extensive preventive care system that relies on neighborhood clinics and allows poor and low-income residents to choose their own physicians.

Hoping to capitalize on the mayor’s “anti-people” image, the Rev. Willie Wilson, a charismatic Afrocentric pastor of a large Baptist church in the Southeast neighborhood, jumped into the Democratic mayoral race after Williams was excluded from the ballot. Like Williams, Wilson is running a write-in campaign. His is a long shot, but he could further damage an image Williams is desperate to repair.

The “not-a-man-of-the-people” reputation was hoisted on the numbers-

cruncher-cum-politico soon after Williams’ 1998 election, when concerns were raised about whether he was “Black enough,” a question that has plagued many of the new, post-civil rights African American leaders, including former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. Williams, determined to issue a resounding *yes*, seemed to overcompensate, making certain appointments and decisions that seemed primarily based on how they would affect his “blackness” rating.

Even with his best efforts, Williams remains in trouble with a large segment of the Black community. A *Washington Post* poll found that 39 percent of Blacks believe Williams does not understand their concerns, and only 4 out of 10 said he deserved to be reelected. Overall, however, 52 percent of all participants in the poll said Williams deserved reelection.

Despite his problems and less than stellar poll numbers, Williams faced only minor opposition before his petition debacle. He maintains the respect of congressional leaders, largely because he isn’t Marion Barry and because he has provided a substantial assist to downtown development. Moreover, while six municipal agencies went into court-order receiverships under Barry, Williams has brought them all back under the District’s control, saving millions of dollars for taxpayers. These facts, and \$1.4 million in the campaign coffers, have kept any viable opponents out of the race.

There is no denying that the petition scandal has severely damaged Williams’ image. Although he is predicted to win reelection, the next four years won’t be easy. “Everybody’s effort to give D.C. a new image has gone into the toilet,” says Dorothy Brizill, co-founder and director of DC Watch, a government watchdog organization that led the successful challenge to Williams’ qualifying petitions. As far as the mayor is concerned, she added, “the sheen is off the apple.” ■

Jonetta Rose Barras is a freelance journalist who has covered District politics for 20 years.

POLITICAL REPORT

McKinney Loses Race To Majette in Georgia

By Joe Davidson

The upset of two veteran Congressional Black Caucus members in primary elections this summer raises issues of outside campaign funding and influence that reach well beyond the fate of the defeated legislators.

Cynthia McKinney, a five-term Democrat, lost her suburban Atlanta seat in the August 20 primary to Denise Majette, a former judge. As with Earl Hilliard's loss, after 10 years, of his congressional seat in Alabama (see FOCUS, August 2002), the McKinney race drew national attention and money.





In both races, much of the attention focused on funds to the challengers from Jewish, pro-Israel contributors, who were upset by statements or votes made by the incumbents. Yet the elections were more complex than that. With Hilliard, there were complaints that he had neglected constituent services. In Georgia's 4th congressional district, McKinney was unable to rally the people she had served for a decade.

Majette's \$875,557 campaign bankroll was 48 percent greater than McKinney's (according to available data at press time). She also profited from Republican cross-over votes in Georgia's open primary system.

"It looks like the Republicans wanted to beat me more than the Democrats wanted to keep me," McKinney said in her concession speech.

Majette, too, was a cross-over voter in the 2000 presidential primary, when she voted

for conservative Republican Alan Keyes. Her money provided her the power to energize White Democrats and Republicans who turned out in force against McKinney. "Mobilizing White voters took a lot of media and that's where the outside money played a role," says David Bositis, a senior research associate at the Joint Center. "The money was an important factor."

Total Raised and Spent		
Cynthia A. McKinney		
Raised:		\$590,095
Spent:		\$616,591
PACs:	\$151,038	(26%)
Individual:	\$415,759	(70%)
Candidate:	\$0	-
Other:	\$23,298	(4%)
Denise L. Majette		
Raised:		\$875,577
Spent:		\$679,372
PACs:	\$64,400	(7%)
Individual:	\$774,907	(89%)
Candidate:	\$35,000	(4%)
Other:	\$1,250	(0%)
As of July 31, 2002 Source: Center for Responsive Politics		

That money led to an uneasy feeling among some African Americans that outside forces exert too much power in picking African American leaders. "To have non-African-Americans from around the country putting millions into a race to unseat one of our leaders for expressing her right of free speech is definitely a problem," Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D., Texas), chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, told the *New York Times*.

McKinney upset even some supporters when she hinted, earlier this year, that

President Bush or members of his administration could profit from the September 11 attacks. While she said she was "not aware of any evidence" that this has happened, she added that "a complete investigation might reveal that to be the case."

Though McKinney had money from Arab American sources, they do not match the political wealth and influence of Jewish American donors. "The outside contributors did not balance each other," according to Bositis. "The Arab contributors in the United States don't have very much money."

After her victory, Majette told BET's "Lead Story" that her outside contributions were due to "people wanting a voice of moderation in the state and in the country.... I'm beholden to the 4th District, that's who I owe the greatest allegiance...."

Parents Evaluate Special Education

By Mary K. Garber

Less than three decades after Congress passed the "Education for All Handicapped Children Act," which required that all public schools educate disabled children, the nation's special education system is coming under fire from many quarters. With the legislation (now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) up for reauthorization this year, participants with various perspectives on the system charge that it is expensive, burdensome, ineffective, and racially biased.

In search of answers to these charges, a study conducted by Public Agenda reviewed the opinions of those who know the special education system from the inside — parents with children in special education classes in the nation's public schools. The resulting report, "When It's Your Own Child: A Report on Special Education from the Families Who Use It," is based on a national telephone survey of 510 parents of K-12 children enrolled in those classes.

The results show that African American parents are more likely to be dissatisfied with special education than parents generally, who view the system favorably. Notwithstanding those favorable views, a substantial minority of parents overall are sharply critical.

Categorizing Black Students

In 1975, when the legislation was passed, about two million of the nation's school children received special education services. By 1999, that number had tripled, with one child in six receiving services to accommodate physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. Much of this increase was caused by the sudden escalation in the number of children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Critics charge that schools have become too eager to categorize students, particularly African Americans students, as needing services for emotional problems or learning disabilities, when they actually need other assistance, including better teaching, constructive discipline and family counseling.

The financial impact of the increase in special ed students is staggering. The \$12,000 it costs to educate a special education student is nearly twice as much as the amount needed to teach those in the regular curriculum. Local school administrators and school boards complain that special education absorbs a disproportionate share of their resources—20 cents of every dollar—leaving significantly reduced resources to teach the remaining students, who make up the great majority. A survey of National School Boards Association members showed that 88 percent considered special education an area of moderate or significant concern. They point to the federal government's failure to provide adequate funding for local school systems to meet federal requirements. In fact, only 15 percent of special education funding comes from the federal government, much less than the 40 percent that federal lawmakers promised to contribute nearly three decades ago.

Not all of the criticism involves costs, however. Researchers have recently suggested that racial bias or cultural factors may play a role in who is diagnosed as needing special education. According to a study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (see May 2001 Political Report), African American children are three times as likely as their White peers to be categorized as mentally retarded, and they are labeled emotionally unstable almost twice as often. Black children in predominantly White schools were especially likely to be considered as candidates for special education, suggesting that cultural bias played a role in the evaluation process. In addition, boys of all races are much more likely than girls to be placed in special education classes.

The report by Public Agenda, a research organization, said school officials also have questioned the effectiveness and quality of special education. Critics charge that the system's bureaucratic red tape and inefficiency inhibit its ability to offer high quality services to students.

Very few parents found that their schools were eager to classify their child as needing special education. Most had the opposite experience—that is, they found it difficult to get the information they needed to place their children in special classes. In fact, 70 percent of the parents believe that children lose out on needed special education services because their parents are unaware of what services they are entitled to receive. Sixty-five percent of special education parents agree, however, that many children being placed in special education have behavior problems rather than actual disabilities, according to Public Agenda. More than half also agree that many children would not be in special education if they had received the appropriate help sooner.

Special education parents are mostly unaware of funding issues or the debate in Congress over them. As might be expected, these parents are generally much more interested in issues that directly affected

their child's immediate needs than in the details of budgets and funding. With regard to their own schools, they have mixed views over whether or not funding is adequate.

Differing Opinions

On the issue of racism in special education placement, Black and Hispanic parents are much more likely to suspect racism (44 percent vs 18 percent) than are other parents. Still, a 41 percent plurality of all special education parents surveyed say they simply do not know if racism is a factor, and nearly a quarter of minority parents indicated that they do not know.

The sharpest differences in opinion between special education parents and special education critics concern performance. Once parents have surmounted the initial hurdles to getting access to services, they are surprisingly happy with their schools and teachers. Seven in 10 say that their current school is doing a good or excellent job, and a similar number rate their school as good or excellent for the skill and quality of its teachers. Seventy percent believe that their child's teacher is well informed about their child's disability.

Despite these positive findings, Public Agenda also found that substantial numbers of special education parents are highly dissatisfied. One in three said that their child's current school was doing a poor or fair job of providing special education services. A like percentage complained of frustration with the effort to obtain services even after the school was aware of the child's needs; about 25 percent said that it was necessary to fight to get needed services. Forty-five percent of special education parents felt that their child's program was not preparing him or her to cope with the real world after high school. ■

Correction: The August issue misstated the first name of the former Raleigh, NC mayor. The correct name is Clarence Lightner.

ECONOMIC REPORT

The American Dream: A House to Call Home

By Margaret C. Simms

In the year since September 11, 2001, the economy has gone through a number of trials and tribulations. Throughout much of the period, the housing sector has been a stabilizing and uplifting force.

Recognizing this and also aware of a vast racial gap in home ownership, President Bush has proposed a four-point program to increase home ownership rates among families of color.

The proven value of home ownership as a source of wealth makes racial gaps in home ownership extremely important. While many households of color were able to share in the boom of the late 1990s, the gaps between African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and their White counterparts remain large and are unlikely to close in the absence of direct intervention. *The State of the Nation's Housing: 2002*, released in June by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, estimates that people of color accounted for over 40 percent of net new home ownership between 1996 and 2001. However, their ownership rates were roughly two-thirds of those among White households. Approximately 48 percent of African Americans owned their own homes, compared with 74 percent of White, 46 percent of Hispanic, and 54 percent of Asian American households.

As Bush put it in a June address at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, "that ownership gap signals that something might be wrong in the land of plenty." These racial gaps are problematic, not just for Black and

other households of color, but for the overall economy, because they and immigrant households will constitute two-thirds of new households formed over the next 20 years.

The importance of the housing sector to the economy and to individual households is apparent from figures contained in the Harvard report. Expenditures on housing constitute approximately 20 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In late 2001 and early 2002, low interest rates and mild weather combined to make the housing sector a salvation for the economy. New home purchases and home refinancing boosted employment in construction and generated income for real estate brokers and the mortgage industry.

Wealth Accumulation

Home ownership is also important to individuals and families because for most people it is the major source of wealth accumulation. About 50 percent of a typical family's wealth is in the form of home equity. In a period of stock market gyrations, the fairly constant upward movement of housing values has probably increased that proportion.

According to *State of the Nation's Housing*, a home purchased for \$125,000 in 1995 increased in value by \$27,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars, giving a buyer who made a 10 percent down payment a gain of 215 percent by the end of 2001. Buyers who put 20 percent down would have gained only 108 percent over the six-year period, but that would have been better than most of the alternatives available over the same period. Even people who owned their homes for only three years would have gains that were

about 66 percent of households owning for the entire period.

The Bush Plan

Administration officials say the Bush plan has four features that, along with private sector initiatives, will increase the number of Black and Brown home owners by 5.5 million by 2010. Included in the package are proposals designed to (1) provide down payment assistance; (2) increase the supply of affordable housing; (3) increase support for self-help programs; and (4) simplify the home buying process and increase consumer education.

One reason for the ownership gap is the need for a substantial down payment. The Joint Center for Housing Studies estimates that about 20 percent of home buyers get help with their down payment (on average one-half of the amount needed) and some get on-going support with housing costs from parents and others for the first few years. Here, White buyers generally have more options than African Americans and Hispanics, whose relatives are less likely to have the accumulated wealth to help out. When people of color do receive help with down payments, it is estimated that they receive only half as much.

Bush would provide \$200 million a year for the American Dream Downpayment Fund, estimated to help approximately 40,000 families a year with both down payments and closing costs. The proposed program is modeled on the existing HOME program and would provide an average subsidy of \$5,000 to prospective home owners with annual incomes not higher than 80 percent of their local area's median income. This level of subsidy would constitute about 40 percent of the down payment on a \$125,000 house (assuming a 10 percent down payment requirement).

The rising cost of housing places African American households at a particular disadvantage because it raises both the required down payment and the income necessary to qualify for mortgage financing.

Since 1997, it is estimated that housing prices in eight of 50 metropolitan areas increased by 30 percent or more, much faster than income growth. In a metropolitan area like Los Angeles, housing price increases outpaced income gains by three to one. (See graph)

Bush is proposing a Single-Family Affordable Housing Tax Credit to encourage production of 200,000 affordable homes for sale to low and moderate income families. He plans to spend \$2.4 billion on this effort. State and local governments would issue these credits to developers or investor partnerships that produce and sell housing units to qualified buyers within a year after the unit is certified for occupancy. While this program could reduce the cost of producing low and moderate income housing, it may have limited impact on the housing supply in central cities and close-in suburbs, where most low and moderate income African American families reside. The housing status report notes that redevelopment in these areas is too costly to be attractive relative to construction in the outer suburbs and it is not clear that the tax credit alone will be sufficient to outweigh the cost disadvantage.

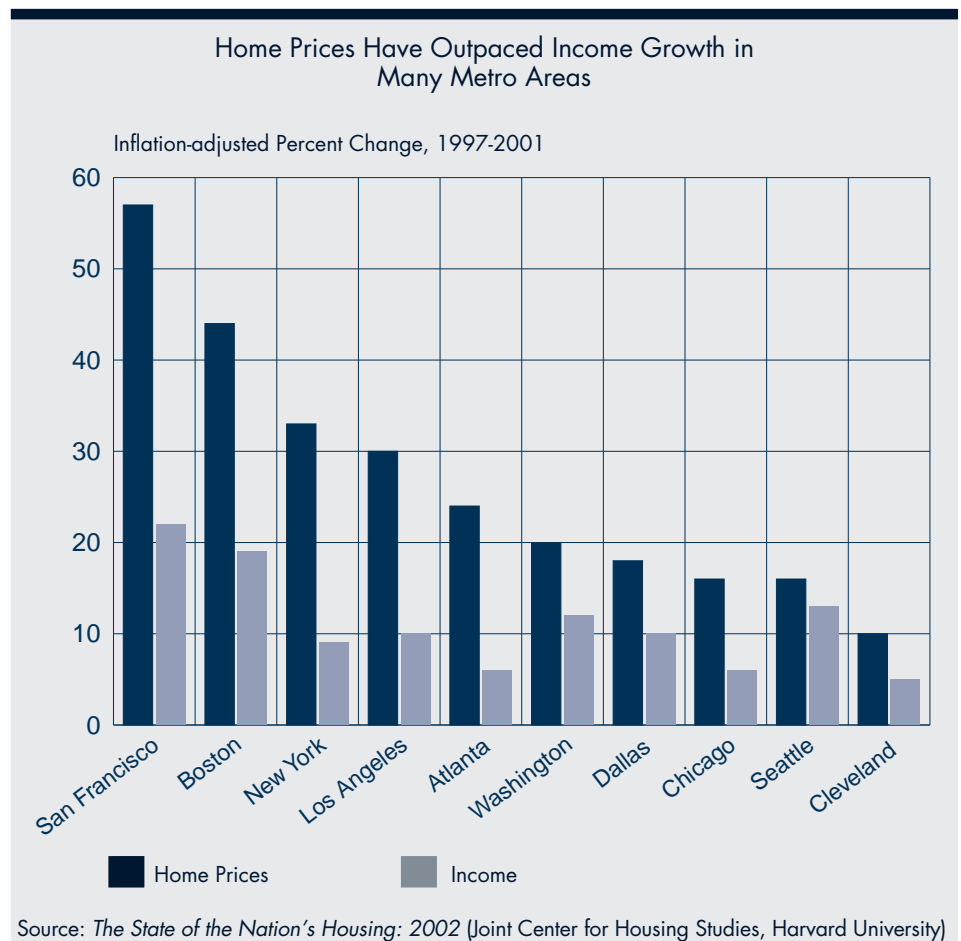
Qualifying for a mortgage is not just a matter of having sufficient current income to make the monthly payment. A record of good credit is also necessary. In this area, the Department of Housing and Urban Development is encouraging community-based organizations, especially churches, to work with families to increase their knowledge of the home buying process and the use of credit. The federal government will expand its initiatives in this area. Several programs operated by the Department of the Treasury and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation are cited in the Bush proposals, including Money Smart. Money Smart is a FDIC training curriculum that “helps consumers of any age gain a better understanding of banking products and services, savings, and the importance of good credit.”

Private and semi-public lenders such as Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae are supporting efforts to raise the level of consumer education and have committed to doing even more in the future.

The consumer education approach to improving access to credit tends to ignore the role that lender discrimination plays in that process. Numerous studies have documented differential patterns in mortgage lending over the years. While overt discrimination has declined, there are still signs that mortgage lenders may segment their markets. For example, *State of the Nation's Housing* notes that 58 percent of African Americans rely on government-backed loans and subprime lending arrangements to finance their home purchases. Subprime lending allows individuals with weak credit records to obtain mortgages, but on terms that cost

more and, therefore, reduce or jeopardize the accumulation of home equity. A recent study for the Center for Community Change suggests that racial differences in subprime lending are not solely the result of differences in lender risk that might be associated with poor credit. While this study focuses on the refinancing market, its findings are similar to earlier studies by others credible organizations, including Freddie Mac. ■

Resources: The State of the Nation's Housing, www.jchs.harvard.edu; President Bush's proposal, www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/homeownership/; Fannie Mae, www.fanniemae.com; Freddie Mac, www.freddie.mac.com; and Center for Community Change, www.communitychange.org.



WASHINGTON MANDATES 'SCHOOL CHOICE' LAW'S EFFECT UNCERTAIN

BY MEGAN TWOHEY

For two years in a row, 8,652 public schools across the country have failed to meet state performance standards, according to the U.S. Education Department.

Under orders from Washington, school officials must now offer their students the option and funding to switch to schools within their district that meet performance standards. And in proposed federal regulations released last month, the department said they should offer more than one choice.

But as school districts scramble to implement or expand "school choice" programs, many say there's not enough space at schools that score high on evaluation measures or time to accommodate all the students eligible for transfers. Still, only a small number of eligible students nationwide are likely to request transfers this year, school officials say.

That's because under the federal "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, signed in January, school districts are also required to give students who stay in low-scoring schools federally funded support services, like tutoring and other after-school programs.

For the 2002-2003 school year, Congress increased federal funding for public schools based on their population of low-income children by \$150 million (raising it from \$10.2 billion to \$10.35 billion) and required school districts to set aside between 5 and 15 percent of their share to help cover the cost of "school choice" and supplemental services. State officers who administer the "Title I" program for low-income students are now crafting lists of service providers to send to parents by the time school starts.

"My guess is that when parents are faced with the choice of staying in school and

Under the "No Child Left Behind" legislation, all states must implement statewide accountability systems, which will:

- Set academic standards in each content area
- Gather specific, objective data through tests aligned with those standards
- Use test data to identify strengths and weaknesses in the system
- Report school academic achievement to parents and communities
- Empower parents to take action based on school information
- Recognize schools that make real progress
- Direct changes in schools that need help.

Source: Department of Education

getting services or being transported to another part of town, they'll opt to stay," says Jeff Simering, legislative director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that represents large urban school districts. He's been helping superintendents implement "school choice" plans since January.

The number of schools labeled low-performing varies from state to state. Illinois has 435, Michigan 1,513, Texas 121, and West Virginia 13. Only Wyoming and Arkansas have no schools of this kind.

Each state's population and its quality of teaching help explain these differences. But the main reason for the drastically different numbers is that each state has its own

technique for measuring the success of its schools. Some are much stricter than others. The evaluations should become more uniform next year. Another detail of the "No Child Left Behind" Act that is now being finalized will require states to apply similarly high standards to the evaluations of their schools.

In Chicago's school district, which already has a voluntary "school choice" program, 179 elementary schools were labeled failing. But only the lowest-income students at the 50 worst schools have the option to transfer. And they're only allowed to switch to schools within a three-mile radius of their home school—a restriction that leaves many of the higher scoring schools out of reach. That's because a lot of the better schools are full, according to Chicago schools CEO Arne Duncan. The district plans to spend 30 million of 40 million new federal dollars on tutoring, teacher training and after-school services, among other things.

Throughout Alabama, where more than 50 schools were labeled low-performing, school districts are hurrying to notify parents of their option to send their kids elsewhere. But they're not making any promises. Angela Mann, spokeswoman for schools in Montgomery County, home to the largest number of low-performing schools in the state, where 6,000 of 33,000 students are eligible to transfer, says that the district doesn't have the time to accommodate all the requests for changes that it has received.

In Maryland's Montgomery County, school officials have created a "school choice" plan that pairs the 10 worst schools with the 10 best ones. Low-income students were given priority to switch, but only a small number said yes. Of the 6,000 students attending low-performing schools, just 102 have applied for transfers, and just five of those children are from low-income families. The rest are from middle-class backgrounds. ■

Megan Twohey writes for Stateline.org, which provided reprint permission for this article.

VOUCHER DEBATE CHANGES VENUE

Continued from cover

Still, proponents, including Arme y, say the ruling has stripped opponents of their most potent argument: that vouchers cross the constitutional line separating church and state.

“Never again can those opposed to extending choice to disadvantaged students hide behind phony church-state issues in their desperate efforts to uphold chronically failing education bureaucracies,” Arme y said.

Such exuberance among school voucher proponents was not contained to Capitol Hill. Speaking in Cleveland days later, President Bush compared the 5-4 ruling to the biggest civil rights victories in history.

“The Supreme Court in 1954 declared that our nation cannot have two education systems. And that was the right decision. Can’t have two systems, one for African Americans and one for Whites. . .what’s notable and important is that the Court declared that our nation will not accept one education system for those who can afford to send their children to a school of their choice and for those who can’t. And that’s just as historic.”

A more sober assessment probably is more realistic. There’s no doubt the Supreme Court’s June decision upholding vouchers gives new life to the issue by removing the constitutional cloud that has shrouded it for years. But even with that, the ruling does little more than throw the issue back to state legislatures and local school boards, where it faces state constitutional obstacles and determined political opposition.

“If this decision brings new efforts to enact voucher legislation, we will fight these efforts,” said Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation’s second-largest teachers union.

Howard Fuller, chairman of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO),

a group organizing grassroots support for voucher programs around the country, knows his fight is far from over. “BAEO is under no illusions that the struggle is over,” he says. “Those who oppose school choice programs are tenacious.”

Even so, this much is clear: the Court’s voucher decision will be a major force shaping the future debate over public education, even if it does not lead to a proliferation of actual voucher programs. It likely will accelerate a wide range of school choice options already redefining public education around the country.

Over the past decade, more than 2,400 charter schools—publicly funded schools that operate largely independent of local

“failing” because of their students’ stubbornly low standardized test scores now have the option to transfer to other public schools or to receive private tutoring at public expense.

In addition, there are voucher programs that use public money to send children to private and parochial schools in Cleveland, Milwaukee and Florida. Vouchers are used to fund student education in rural areas of Maine and Vermont that are not served by public schools. And six states — Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Arizona, Florida and Pennsylvania — offer tax credits or deductions to parents who send their children to private schools or to individuals and businesses that contribute to private school scholarship funds.

In the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision, voucher supporters already are predicting a new wave of voucher legislation in at least a half dozen states over the next year. But those measures will face stiff opposition from teachers unions and other public school advocates who worry that

Voters, for the last 30 years, have rejected vouchers every time they’ve been proposed

Location	Year	Yes	No
Maryland	1972	45%	55%
Michigan	1978	26%	74%
Colorado	1992	33%	67%
Washington	1993	30%	64%
Michigan	2000	31%	69%
California	2000	29%	71%

Source: National Education Association

public school authorities—have opened in 34 states. Private companies are running another 350 public schools around the country. Other educational options, such as on-line charter schools, which effectively subsidize home schoolers, are also becoming more popular.

Under the “No Child Left Behind” Act, which took effect in July, millions of school children who attend schools deemed

voucher programs will lead to the abandonment of struggling public schools. To date, public opinion—not to mention state law—seems to be on the side of the opponents.

The vast majority of states have constitutional provisions restricting the flow of public money to religious institutions or requiring publicly funded educational programs to be under the direct control of

state legislators. In early August, a Florida Circuit Court judge struck down that state's school voucher program, ruling that the state's constitution is "clear and unambiguous" in prohibiting public money from flowing to church schools.

For years, school vouchers have proven to be one of the nation's most divisive education issues. Proponents argue that they give poor people school choice options enjoyed by more affluent families while providing needed competition to the public schools.

Opponents, however, say vouchers benefit only a relative handful of students while draining millions of dollars from the public schools that serve the vast majority of students, especially those who are low-income or African American. The Cleveland program, for example, spends about \$10 million to send 4,300 mostly low-income Cleveland students to 51 private and parochial schools. The maximum grant is \$2,250 per student.

The Milwaukee program, launched in 1990, last year gave about 10,700 of that city's 100,000 public school students \$5,553 each in vouchers to attend 104 private and parochial schools. Florida's program, meanwhile, paid up to \$3,472 each to send 47 students to five private schools. That program is growing rapidly—by early August it had enrolled 702 students for the 2002-2003 school year.

Beyond the cost of vouchers to public schools, critics point out that the private schools participating in voucher programs are not required to meet the same test score and other requirements that guide public schools.

In most cases, voucher schools are required to admit all eligible students and must accept vouchers as full tuition. This means most schools that take vouchers are small or parochial — expensive private schools generally are not in the voucher loop. Schools must also abide by building safety codes and civil rights laws, but in many cases, there are no guidelines for curriculum, testing or even attendance.

Voucher proponents counter that the accountability mechanisms are unnecessary

because voucher parents have the ultimate choice of moving their children out of private schools that they find unsatisfactory—an option open to few poor parents who currently have children who attend poor performing public schools.

Roberta Kitchen, legal guardian to a voucher student in Cleveland's St. John Nottingham Lutheran school, says vouchers provide "a chance to break the cycle of poverty and despair into which (children) had been born." She adds that she didn't take in foster children "just to lose them" to the drugs and crime she says infest her neighborhood public schools.

Also, advocates say voucher programs could prompt public schools to offer a wider menu of educational choices to parents. In Milwaukee, the public school system now permits more charter schools and has launched additional magnet programs to attract students. The school system also has run infomercials, purchased billboard space and radio ads and run open houses to let parents know about its offerings.

Despite the ongoing debate over vouchers, there is no solid evidence that they affect student achievement. A General Accounting Office report last year concluded that there was little or no difference in academic achievement between voucher recipients and students who remained in public schools.

This lack of evidence contributes to the apparent public ambivalence toward vouchers. Polls generally find that a slim majority of the general population opposes them. But among African Americans, who are disproportionately burdened by poor school achievement, voucher support appears to be stronger.

A 1999 survey by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research group, found that 68 percent of African Americans favored vouchers. A 2000 Joint Center National Opinion Poll found that 57 percent of Black respondents favored them, compared to 49 percent of the general population.

However, that support evaporates when people are asked to vote on actual voucher proposals in their localities. In 2000, voucher proposals won less than 30 percent

of the vote in both Michigan and California. That percentage approximately reflects the portion of the Black vote for vouchers in both states.

Meanwhile, in recent years more than half of the nation's state legislatures have turned back legislation to launch voucher programs. Last year alone, eight states rejected legislative proposals for vouchers, according to the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union and a staunch voucher opponent. Several other states voted down bills to offer tuition-tax credits and tax deductions for people and businesses that make private contributions to fund voucher programs.

Part of the reason for those defeats is the fact that many people—particularly suburban Whites—are happy with the current state of public education and view vouchers as a threat to the public schools that educate their children.

A Gallup poll last year found that 62 percent of public school parents gave a grade of A or B to their children's public schools. When asked to choose between improving schools by reforming the existing programs or finding some alternative like vouchers, 72 percent of Americans chose reforming the existing system.

But improvement has been too slow to arrive as far as many voucher supporters are concerned. And without the school choice that vouchers promise, supporters contend that poor people—particularly African Americans—will be condemned to remain in second-class schools.

Yet before these supporters can see an extensive use of vouchers, they will have to overcome strong opposition based on the separation of church and state, as well as the widespread concern that vouchers will damage public education. In his opinion, Florida Judge P. Kevin Davey captured that fear when he said vouchers cause a "dollar for dollar reduction in the funds of the public school or school districts where the student was assigned." ■

Michael Fletcher covers education for The Washington Post national desk.

CHILDREN EXPLOITED IN WEST AFRICA

COCOA PRODUCING NATIONS CITED

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (IRIN) – Despite some increased attention in recent years, exploitative child labor remains rampant in the cocoa-producing communities of West Africa, according to a new study by the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA).

The study, which was released in July, defined child labor as “work that prevents children from attending and participating effectively in school or is performed by children under hazardous conditions that place their healthy physical, intellectual or moral development at risk.” Debt bondage, armed conflict, commercial sexual exploitation and drug trafficking were listed as “the worst forms of child labor,” IITA said.

Many children were found to be involved in hazardous activities that required the use of pesticides and machetes. Family labor was the most common type of work, and most of the working children were below the age of 14, with boys outnumbering girls, researchers found. Numerous children received no pay for their efforts.

The study targeted Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria, and was based on interviews with more than 4,800 farmers, adult workers, child laborers and community leaders. Conducted with assistance from

UNICEF and the International Labor Organization, it was carried out in conjunction with the Sustainable Tree Crops Program, a public-private partnership that seeks to raise incomes and quality of life in cocoa-producing communities.

Meanwhile, there is growing recognition that the full equality of women enhances rapid and sustained development of poor countries. But a recent report by the Ethiopian government said major hurdles would have to be overcome before women could achieve equality.

tion has no alternative at all,” the government added.

Despite the rhetoric and a countrywide drive to educate women, school enrollment rates indicate a serious gap between the education that boys and girls receive. Currently, only about 40 percent of girls across the country are enrolled in primary schools – compared to an average of 57 percent of boys. Both figures are much lower than required for successful nation-building.

The Ethiopian government has acknowledged that women have been oppressed in the country for thousands of years, but insists that a transformation of their status is now under way. “In particular, women, cognizant that their struggle for equality has only just begun, must organize themselves and struggle. A woman must not be passive whenever her legitimate rights are violated,”

Estimates of working children at high risk by selected activities and characteristics

	Cote d’Ivoire	Cameroon	Ghana	Nigeria
Application of pesticides	142,610	5,500	NA	4,600
Children recruited through intermediaries	2,100	0	0	354
Use of machetes by children under 15	109,299	16,192	18,189	2,325
Children without family ties	11,994	NA	NA	NA

Source: International Institute for Tropical Agriculture.

NA = not available

“The development and democratization process under way in our country cannot achieve its goals without the full participation of women,” the Ethiopian government declared in a June statement. “The issue of women’s equality is an issue of the whole society, and this view is becoming widespread in the country. The vital role of women for development and democratiza-

tion the government’s statement concluded. “It must be clear to everyone that democratization and development will never be realized without the participation of women.” ■

IRIN, the Integrated Regional Information Networks of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, provided reprint permission for this story.



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