



## **A Response to People for the American Way (PFAW) and the National Education Association (NEA)**

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**Howard Fuller, Ph.D.  
Distinguished Professor of Education**

**Kaleem Caire  
Executive Director, Black Alliance for Educational Options**

Last month, we released “Lies and Distortions: The Campaign Against School Vouchers.”<sup>1</sup> Two organizations identified in the report, People for the American Way (PFAW) and the National Education Association (NEA), have responded.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we respond to their complaints about our report.

### **The NEA critique of our report**

While the NEA’s two-page response claims “Lies and Distortions” does not reflect “truth and accuracy,” it provides *no* specific examples of inaccuracies in our 39-page report.<sup>3</sup> In addition, NEA’s response provides these new lies and distortions about school vouchers. For example:

- “Vouchers cost more than the present system.”
- “Most voucher-bearing students are not able to get into the schools of their choice.”
- “...[S]ome schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland declined to take voucher students — or dismissed them after they were accepted.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Lies and Distortions” can be viewed at [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org). For a hard copy, contact the Office of Research, Institute for the Transformation of Learning (ITL), 414-765-0691

<sup>2</sup> NEA, “Howard Fuller and the Campaign for Vouchers,” two pages, April 2001; and PFAW, “Whose ‘Lies and Distortions?’ — An Analysis of Voucher Advocates’ New Attack on Journalists, Public School Supporters, and Researchers,” undated, eight pages. For a copy of either response, contact the ITL Office of Research.

<sup>3</sup> The NEA says we should have mentioned that not all private schools choose to participate in voucher programs. We did not mention that because it is widely known, is not in dispute, and thus was irrelevant to a report on lies and distortions.

As to the first statement, NEA provides no documentation. It is well known, though, that the per-pupil cost of the Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida programs is less than the per-pupil costs in public schools in those jurisdictions.

Regarding the second and third claims, NEA again provides no documentation. This is similar to the array of unilateral and erroneous statements that we document in “Lies and Distortions.” Yet another example of this approach can be seen in the following claim, made by NEA President Robert Chase, in a June 2000 letter to *Commentary* magazine:

“Catholic schools, which comprise a large majority of voucher schools in Milwaukee and Cleveland, already reject two-thirds of their applicants. Exclusive private schools reject nine out of every ten.”

In a July 17, 2000 e-mail, George Mitchell, one of our researchers, asked Kathleen Lyons of Chase’s staff for documentation. In a July 26, 2000 response, Lyons said, “I’ve been out of the office, but I’ll look into your request as soon as I can.” Subsequent requests for documentation were not acknowledged.

### **The PFAW critique of our report**

As we note below, PFAW’s response includes new agreement with us on certain issues. In other respects, its response is misleading and inaccurate.

#### ***PFAW claims regarding admission practices.***

In “Lies and Distortions,” we quote PFAW as saying that:

- “...[S]chools in the [Milwaukee] voucher program are being permitted to turn their backs on children with special needs” and
- “Voucher[s] siphon the best students from public schools.”

In its response, PFAW now agrees with us that schools in Milwaukee’s choice program “cannot bar [choice-eligible] special education students from attending.”<sup>4</sup> PFAW’s response then asks a new question: “Are voucher schools adequately serving students with special needs?” It is an interesting question, one that neither PFAW nor we have examined.

PFAW purports to address this question by listing some choice schools that cannot serve students with specified learning disabilities. PFAW says this means that the schools can

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<sup>4</sup> In “Lies and Distortions,” we cite a range of independent reports documenting that tax-supported voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida primarily serve: low-income students, mostly of color; students at low-performing public schools; and students with special education needs.

“turn their backs” on these students. If so, exactly the same thing is true in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). There, the school directory says:

“When children with special education needs select a school/program where their individual needs cannot be appropriately met [what MPS calls an ‘Inappropriate School Choice’], parents will be contacted by special education supervisors to discuss options at other schools....”

In fact, no MPS elementary, middle, or high school accepts all students with special education needs.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in PFAW’s world, every MPS school can “turn its back on children with special needs.”

PFAW’s response also agrees with us that schools in the Milwaukee program must “engage in random selection” in admitting choice-eligible students.<sup>6</sup> PFAW’s then purports to provide evidence that schools aren’t doing this. PFAW cites two “investigations” that it conducted, both in 1999.

In each case, PFAW complained to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). It is undisputed that DPI is openly hostile to school choice. As such, the agency might have been sympathetic to PFAW claims of widespread violations. This was not the case.

- Regarding the first complaint, DPI acknowledged that its own administrative procedures left something to be desired in 1998-99, when the choice program rapidly expanded. In response, DPI worked with schools to clarify the random selection requirements. DPI took no action against any school. PFAW omits these facts.
- Regarding the second complaint, DPI dismissed PFAW allegations against 11 of the 18 schools. Regarding the other seven (out of 88 in the program that year), DPI said, “nearly all...agreed to adjust their processes so as to bring their practices into compliance....” DPI has imposed no sanctions against any of the schools. PFAW’s response also omits these facts.

### ***PFAW claims regarding academic achievement.***

In “Lies and Distortions,” we cite numerous studies and related information suggesting that school choice programs lead to improved academic achievement among participating students or affected public schools.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Fuller and George Mitchell, "Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," *Current Education Issues 2000-01*, Marquette University, ITL, January 2000, also available at [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org).

<sup>6</sup> As Fuller and Mitchell document ("Selective Admission Practices? Comparing the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program"), many public schools in Milwaukee screen student applications based on ability level and other criteria.

<sup>7</sup> After “Lies and Distortions” was printed, we learned of a yet another study documenting substantial academic gains at public schools in Milwaukee with the highest concentration of students eligible for the city’s voucher program. See Caroline M. Hoxby, Harvard University and the National Bureau of

Of the many studies we cite in “Lies and Distortions,” PFAW disputes only one.<sup>8</sup>

PFAW also claims we “ignore[d]” evidence “that well-funded public schools with reduced class sizes produce test scores equal or superior to voucher schools.”<sup>9</sup> As we do not dispute that some public schools perform better than some private schools, the Rouse study cited by PFAW (note 9) is irrelevant to “Lies and Distortions.”

However, PFAW’s description of Rouse is misleading and thus it is relevant. PFAW omits Rouse’s caution that her study does not establish causation regarding class size. Further, she stresses, “there are likely to be other equally compelling school-specific factors [than class size] that explain the [achievement] differences.”

PFAW also claims we misrepresented the views of University of Florida Professor David Figlio regarding gains by low-rated Florida public schools. “Lies and Distortions” quoted Figlio as telling the *Tampa Tribune*, “All you need to have is the threat of vouchers.” Based on the PFAW claim, we asked Figlio to comment. In a May 2, 2001 e-mail, he said: “This was an ACCURATE quote [but] the reporters half-quoted me. The full comment...was something along the lines of ‘All you need to have is the threat of vouchers for schools to start doing something. But it’s too early to know for sure how much of the change is due to vouchers, and what are the broader implications.’”

## Summary

- NEA’s response does not cite a single factual error in our 39-page report. Instead, it contains new lies and distortions about tax-supported school choice programs.
- PFAW’s response deals mainly with admission practices and academic achievement. Regarding the former, it now agrees with us, i.e., Milwaukee’s law requires random selection and does not allow students with special needs to be excluded. Regarding academic achievement, PFAW disputes only one of several studies we present.

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Economic Research, Inc., “School Choice and School Productivity (Or, Could School Choice Be A Tide That Lifts All Boats?),” presented at the NBER Conference on the Economics of School Choice, February 22-24, 2001, Islamadora, Florida.

<sup>8</sup> Jay P. Greene, “An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program,” available at [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_aplus.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_aplus.htm), February 15, 2001.

Greene’s study dealt with students at low-performing Florida schools faced with the prospect of vouchers. He said students at those schools made larger gains on academic achievement tests than did students at other schools. PFAW says we “ignor[ed] serious questions” about Greene’s study raised by academic opponents of school vouchers. These questions were posted on an internet web site after “Lies and Distortions” went to press. As an indication of how “serious” the questions are, the sponsor of the internet site has declined to post Greene’s response. A link to the critique, and Greene’s response, is at [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/greenes\\_reply.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/greenes_reply.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Cecilia Rouse, “Schools and Student Achievement: More Evidence from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” *Economic Policy Review*, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, March 1998, pp. 61-78.