



“The Cleveland Public schools have failed all the initiatives in their last report card. I don't feel as though we have enough time for a new school board or new superintendent to get it together, four or five years down the road. My children are in school right now. I think to leave them in a system that fails, just... serves a sentence of death on them.”

Roberta Kitchen, Cleveland, Ohio

Why School Choice?

School choice supporters have voiced growing alarm with persistent and unacceptably low levels of academic achievement by students in urban schools. These concerns were a major factor leading to enactment of voucher plans in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida.

Cleveland

Ohio's largest newspaper described this situation in Cleveland: “Cleveland scored the lowest of any school district in Ohio on the latest state report card, failing to meet a single one of 27 standards for student performance. The district was one of 69 around the state ... declared to be in a state of ‘academic emergency.’”

“Cleveland Schools Score Lowest in State,” The Plain Dealer, December 23, 1999.

A recent study publicized Cleveland's 28% graduation rate for 1998, the worst among the 50 largest school districts in the United States. All of the city's racial and ethnic groups exhibited such low rates, including only 26% for Latino students, 29% for African American students, and 23% for white students.

“High School Graduation Rates in the United States,” Jay P. Greene, Manhattan Institute, November 2001.

Milwaukee

An hour-long national TV broadcast identified the genesis for school choice in Milwaukee:

“With 100,000 students, the Milwaukee public school district is a big-city system long beset by big-city problems: poverty, poor discipline, and violence. A decade ago, when the voucher battle began, the dropout rate in the Milwaukee schools was among the highest in the country, the average GPA was a D-plus, and almost 20 percent of all high school students were suspended at least once during the year. The district had, by then,

become more than 50 percent minority, and African-American parents in particular were clamoring for a way out for their children.”

CNN Perspectives, April 15, 2001.

Graduation rates in Milwaukee are also alarming. A recent study found that “Milwaukee has a 74% graduation rate for whites while African American and Latino students have graduation rates of 34% and 42%, respectively.” Overall, only 43% of Milwaukee Public School (MPS) students graduated in 1998, which placed Milwaukee as the third lowest graduation rate in the nation among large city school districts.

“High School Graduation Rates in the United States,” Jay P. Greene, Manhattan Institute, November 2001.

Florida

Students are eligible for A+ Opportunity Scholarships if their public school is designated “failing” for two years in a four-year period by the Florida Department of Education. In 1999, the first year the state started awarding A-to-F grades, 78 schools received a ranking of F. Describing his reason for introducing the A+ Education Plan in Florida, Governor Jeb Bush stated:

“Regrettably, too many of Florida’s children are not receiving the education that will enable them to lead successful, productive lives in the next century. More than 30 percent of our high school juniors are unable to demonstrate attainment of 8th-grade math skills, and 70 percent of Florida’s 10th graders scored below basic in reading on the 1998 administration of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).”

“Transforming Florida’s Public Schools into Centers of Excellence,” *Tampa Tribune*, February 15, 1999.

A National Problem

The conditions in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida are not isolated.

Professor Lawrence Stedman (School of Education and Human Development, State University of New York) described the national dimensions as follows:

“...[Twelfth] grade black students are performing at the level of middle school white students. These students are about to graduate, yet they lag four or more years behind in every area [including] reading, math, science, writing, history, and geography. Latino seniors do somewhat better ... in math and writing but, in the other areas, are also four years behind white 12th graders ... [R]acial gaps in achievement ... are as large or larger than they were a decade ago ... The conclusion is distressing but unavoidable ... [A]

generation has passed and the achievement of educational equality remains an elusive dream. Schools and society remain divided into two different worlds, one black and one white, separate and unequal.”

“An Assessment of the Contemporary Debate Over U.S. Achievement,” presented in May 1997 at a Brookings Institution conference.

The conditions described by Stedman are longstanding and persist today. As reported by *The Wall Street Journal*: “The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that about a third of American fourth graders can’t read. For African-American and Hispanic [students] the numbers are grimmer still: 63 percent and 58 percent, respectively.” (June 1, 2001)

Reflecting a heightened national concern among African Americans, a new national organization has formed. The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) has chapters forming in about twenty cities. Its members advocate a broad range of expanded educational options, especially for low-income families. A page one story in *The New York Times* on this growing movement began with a reference to BAEO board member Cory A. Booker, a Newark, NJ City Council member:

“When Cory A. Booker talks about fixing America’s school system, he invokes the words of Malcolm X: by any means necessary.... ‘It’s one of the last remaining major barriers to equality of opportunity in America, the fact that we have inequality of education. I don’t necessarily want to depend on the government to educate my children — they haven’t done a good job.... Only if we return power to the parents can we find a way to fix the system.’”

“Young Blacks Turn to School Vouchers as Civil Rights Issue,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2000.