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## Black Alliance for Educational Options

DATE: December 18, 2000

TO: Professor Michael Apple  
Mr. Gerald Bracey

FROM: Kaleem Caire  
Executive Director, Black Alliance for Educational Options

Thank you for referring me to your December 1 report, "School Vouchers," posted at <http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/brief.html>. It contains misleading and erroneous information, as listed below. I thank Andrew Coulson, Patrick Wolf, and George Mitchell for assistance in identifying these errors.

I hope you will issue a corrected version. "Policy Briefs" on a complex issue such as school choice often don't reflect a primary investigation of the theories, issues, and individuals being discussed. A conversation with those participating and teaching in existing choice programs, and an accurate representation of their feedback, may better inform your opinions and enhance the accuracy and legitimacy of your review. I welcome any comments you might have.

### Voucher history

- You say:

"The idea of vouchers in education is not new, having been first proposed by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1838."

- In fact:

In Thomas Paine's 1791 "Rights of Man" (part 2, chapter 5), after describing a system of government grants to low-income families that would cover the cost of private school tuition and materials, Paine explained that: "Education, to be useful to the poor, should be on the spot; and the best method, I believe, to accomplish this, is to enable the parents to pay the expense themselves."

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- You say:

“Among those who were influenced by [Milton Friedman] was...Ronald Reagan, who, as president, proposed the use of vouchers in this country.”

- In fact:

Notwithstanding your implication, President Reagan wasn't the first federal official to propose school vouchers. John Brandl, Assistant Secretary for Education at HEW during the Johnson Administration, proposed a pilot school voucher program for low-income students.

- You say:

“To date, school-voucher experiments have been small and usually in inner-city settings...”

- In fact:

Programs in Vermont and Maine predate the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Richard W. Garnett, "After 200 Years, School Choice Loses in Maine," *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 1999; Nina Shokraii Rees, "School Choice 2000 – What's Happening in the States," The Heritage Foundation; and CNN's web page on the subject). A December 12 article by Kenneth Cooper of *The Washington Post* mentions both the Maine and Vermont programs.

### **Florida's program**

- You say:

“A judge has ruled [the Florida voucher program] unconstitutional. Moreover, the Florida program makes students eligible for vouchers only if their public schools fall below certain minimum standards for student achievement. So far, no Florida schools have fallen below those standards.”

- In fact:

As the October 4, 2000 edition of *The St. Petersburg Times*, in “Florida Court Upholds Voucher Law,” reports:

“A state appeals court ruled Tuesday that Florida's voucher law is constitutional and that the state Legislature may use public dollars to send children to private schools. Though the case is far from over -- it could be headed back to trial court or up to the Florida Supreme Court -- voucher advocates cheered the unanimous ruling by the 1st District Court of Appeal in Tallahassee...[T]he Opportunity Scholarship Program...was allowed to continue even after the trial judge declared it unconstitutional...51 students from two elementary schools in Pensacola qualified for vouchers last year...The program failed to expand this year because the number of failing schools statewide shrank dramatically and no new schools qualified for vouchers. The Pensacola students have continued to attend nearby private schools...[A] new statewide voucher program for disabled students is slowly taking hold. Under a new state

Page Three, December 18, 2000, Messrs. Apple and Bracey

law, disabled students may seek to transfer to a private school if their needs are not being met in the public schools. Thus far, 639 students have applied to participate in the program...”

### **Rouse’s secondary analysis of student achievement in Milwaukee**

- You say:

“...One researcher [Witte] found no difference between the performance of Milwaukee Public School children and those using vouchers...Others [Greene, et.al.] found differences favoring vouchers in both reading and mathematics...while a third [Rouse] could replicate the advantage only in math.”

- In fact:

Rouse did *replicate* both Witte and Greene, et.al., as a first step in conducting a secondary analysis of each data set.

### **Student achievement in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Dayton**

- You say:

“In [a] widely reported study that purported to show students who used vouchers to enroll in private schools did better than a control group of public school students, the company that gathered and analyzed the data disavowed the researchers' public statements about the conclusions. Analysts at Mathematica Research said the researchers announcement of such results was premature and exaggerated the findings.”

- In fact:

Mathematica did not “disavow” any statements by researchers. While your secondary source — a September 15 *New York Times* story — described a statement from Mathematica, the actual statement neither identifies nor “disavows” anyone. On September 16, Howard Fuller and George Mitchell spoke with Mathematica’s David Myers. Asked if he knew of any misstatement by any of the researchers involved, he said, “No.” Myers later suggested that some newspaper columns (i.e., by William Safire and Robert Reich) had exaggerated results. In the end, Myers’ *sole* concern involved whether overall NYC findings should have been reported by grade level.

By the way, your implication that Mathematica collected and analyzed the data for Dayton-NYC-Washington, D.C. study is wrong. Mathematica only collected and analyzed data for NYC. William Howell and David Campbell collected data from Dayton and Wolf collected data from DC. Analysis of the Dayton and DC data was directed by Howell, with assistance from Paul Peterson, Campbell and Wolf. Mathematica played no role in the collection or analysis of the Dayton or DC data.

Page Four, December 18, 2000, Messrs. Apple and Bracey

The separate reports (“School Choice in New York City After Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarships Program,” by Myers, Peterson, David Mayer, Julia Chou and Howell, and “Test-Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials,” by Howell, Wolf, Peterson and Campbell) are available at <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/pepg/>

- You say

“There actually was no significant test score difference between students who attended private school on vouchers and those who stayed in the public schools, except in a very few limited cases.”

- In fact:

The studies of Dayton, Washington, D.C., and NYC (the latter issued by Mathematica and *co-authored* by Myers, Peterson, Howell, and others) present statistically significant test score gains among students receiving vouchers. As for NYC, in Mathematica’s own words, “...there were large and statistically significant impacts for African American 6th graders who were offered vouchers” (<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/SCHOOL.HTM>).

Further, your claim that test score gains involve “a very few limited cases” is wrong. The positive effects are for African American students in the studies, who comprise a *majority* of the participants and a whopping 94% of those in the DC study.

### **Impact of choice on public schools**

- You say:

“...[T]here is no evidence that [choice will make public schools “more responsive to parents.”

- In fact:

Cary Stidham, chairwoman of the Escambia County School Board (Pensacola, FL) says (“Gov. Bush’s A+ plan proves to be winner for schools,” *Pensacola News Journal*, September 5, 2000):

“...To hear many people tell it, the [Florida voucher plan] was going to leave our public schools in crumbling ruins. Some teachers and administrators called the program ‘dangerous’ and ‘destructive,’ worrying that allowing students to leave failing schools would condemn those schools to continued failure. But they were wrong. Instead, the Escambia County School District responded to the threat of competition. Extended reading, math and writing time blocks were instituted...”

“Students were offered after-school and Saturday tutoring. A major effort was launched to reduce student absenteeism. And, the community became involved through mentoring and volunteer programs to assist teachers in working with children to increase their performance...Escambia County schools have shown nothing but improvement across the board. Last year, nine of our county's schools were given a failing grade by the state. We should be particularly proud that all of them have improved their scores this year.”

In “Competing to Win: How Florida’s A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform,” education researcher Carol Innerst cited public records available at public schools throughout Florida demonstrating efforts to improve instruction and teacher training. As Escambia’s Stidham said, “The opportunity scholarship program uses the most persuasive tool we have as an incentive to get schools to perform - money.”

In Milwaukee, there is growing recognition that expanded parent options are having an effect on the Milwaukee Public Schools. A November 15 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* story listed several MPS schools that had sought, and received, "more freedom to shape their programs than traditional [public] schools." The paper explained: "The schools clearly were aiming to reshape themselves to be more appealing in a more competitive school market." On November 28, *The Journal Sentinel* cited changes in "the fundamental realities of how many [public] schools operate in Milwaukee." It described "decisions to make schools more independent, more innovative, more attuned to their communities — and, most of all, more popular with parents in an era where Milwaukee parents have more choices for publicly funded education than perhaps anyone in American history."

- You say:

Regarding the claim that vouchers “drain funds” from public schools, “This clearly occurs” but you offer no examples.

- In fact:

An October 24 analysis of the Milwaukee situation in *USA Today* shows no financial "drain." From 1990 to 1999, the paper found that real MPS spending grew 25%, while enrollment was up 8%. In other words, spending grew at a rate *three times faster than enrollment*.

*USA Today* also reported on the percentage of fourth grade MPS students scoring at or above proficiency levels on statewide tests. *Between 1997-98 and 1999-00, when the choice program grew rapidly, the scores of MPS students rose substantially.* In 1997-98, fewer than half of fourth graders were proficient in reading, math, science, and social studies. By last year, a majority of MPS fourth graders achieved proficiency in *all four categories*.

The Ohio Department of Education hired KMPG Public Services Consulting to study administrative and fiscal issues involving management of the Cleveland program. KMPG reported that per pupil costs in the Cleveland public schools were more than three times that

of the CSTP and that the CSTP had not cut state financial support from Cleveland's public schools.

### **Error 7 – Voucher schools “skim” students**

- You agree with the statement that:

“Vouchers will ‘skim’ or ‘cream’ higher achieving students, thus leaving public schools with a higher proportion of more difficult to education (sic) children and fewer funds for that education.”

- In fact:

You omit data from several school choice programs that refute this claim. Jay Greene reports that: “The average income of families participating in the Milwaukee program was \$10,860. In Cleveland the mean family income was \$18,750. In New York it was \$10,540. In D.C. it was \$17,774 and in Dayton it was \$17,681. In Milwaukee 76% of choice students were in single, female-headed households. In Cleveland the figure was 70%. In D.C. it was 77% and in Dayton it was 76%. The standardized tests [scores] of choice students before they began in private school showed that they averaged below the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile in Milwaukee, below the 27<sup>th</sup> percentile in New York, below the 33<sup>rd</sup> percentile in D.C., and below the 26<sup>th</sup> percentile in Dayton. In other words, choice students were generally performing in the bottom third academically.” (“A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know,” prepared for the Conference on Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Public Education, Sponsored by the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, March 8-10, 2000, Cambridge, MA.) Separate reports by John Witte, Kim Metcalf, the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, and others confirm Greene’s findings. You omit any reference to these.

A partial list of other omissions from your report includes:

- The endorsement of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program this year by University of Wisconsin Professor John Witte, the program’s evaluator from 1990 through 1995.

Witte writes, “choice can be a useful tool to aid families and educators in inner city and poor communities where education has been a struggle for several generations.” He continues, “If programs are devised correctly, they can provide meaningful educational choices to families that now do not have such choices. And it is not trivial that most people in America... already have such choices.” (Joe Williams, “Ex-Milwaukee evaluator endorses school choice: Opponents of program have used his earlier work to argue it has failed,” *The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, January 9, 2000, p. 1.)

Page Seven, December 18, 2000, Messrs. Apple and Bracey

- A finding of statistically significant achievement gains among students in the Cleveland program by Kim Metcalf at Indiana University.

After two years Metcalf says, “The results indicate that scholarship students in existing private schools had significantly higher test scores than public school students in language (45.0 versus 40.0) and science (40.0 versus 36.0).” (Kim K. Metcalf, “Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, 1996-1999,” Unpublished Manuscript, Indiana University, 1999.)

- The finding of statistically significant gains for voucher students in Charlotte, N.C.

(Jay P. Greene, “The Effect of School Choice: An Evaluation of the Charlotte Children’s Scholarship Fund Program,” August 30, 2000.)

- Findings that school choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland contribute to increased racial balance and diversity at private schools in those cities.

(Jay Greene, “The Racial, Economic, and Religious Context of Parental Choice in Cleveland,” paper presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management meeting in Washington, D.C., November, 1999, at [www.harvard.edu/pepg/index.htm](http://www.harvard.edu/pepg/index.htm), and Howard L. Fuller, Ph.D., and George A. Mitchell, “The Impact of School Choice on Integration in Milwaukee Private Schools,” June 2000, [www.schoolchoiceinfo.org](http://www.schoolchoiceinfo.org).)