

SCHOOL CHOICE IN ACTION

Brother Bob Smith

Most of you probably remember back in the early to middle 1970s when Mohammed Ali (formerly known as Cassius Clay) was the heavyweight champion of the world. Because of his speed and skill, many people referred to him as Superman. On one of his many flights, a stewardess came down the aisle as the plane was readying for take off and said, "Mr. Clay, would you please fasten your seat belt?" And he very indignantly looked up at her and said, "Superman don't wear no seat belt." Without missing a beat, she looked down at him and said, "Superman don't need no airplane either."

My word for you today, as you look at educational reform (e.g., school choice and school charters), is fasten your seat belt, because we are readying for take off. The Milwaukee school system is one example of how educational reform has affected the American school system in a positive manner. School choice has had an invaluable impact on the Milwaukee education system since its inception in 1990, including, to some extent, the Milwaukee public school system. Although the Milwaukee public schools continue to graduate only 50% of their students, they have undertaken some steps to improve their graduation rate as a result of the school choice program. In the last few years, public schools have adopted admissions, quality and attendance standards, advocated increased parental involvement, and focused on improving standardized test scores.

However, many organizations (e.g., ACLU, NEA, WEAC, and the People for Separation of Church and State) continue to attack educational reforms with misleading arguments because they fear that such reforms will usurp some or all of their power. For example, the ACLU, NEA, WEAC and the Milwaukee press argue that school choice has caused the Milwaukee public school system to lose \$22 million this year. This argument is simply false.

Between 1990 and 1999 (the years of the school choice program), the Milwaukee public school system's spending increased by 29%, state aid to the Milwaukee public school system increased by 55%, and the Milwaukee public school system's enrollment increased by

only 8%. Moreover, during this period, the Milwaukee public school system retained (and continues to retain) the difference between the amount that it costs to educate a student in a public school and the amount that it costs to educate a former public school student in a private school, which, at a minimum, is approximately \$4,000 per student. Milwaukee public schools receive \$9,000 per student. In contrast, Milwaukee private schools receive a maximum of \$4,950 per student as part of the school choice program. If the cost of educating a student at a private school is lower than \$4,950, the private school only receives the lower amount. If, however, the cost of educating a student at a private school is higher than \$4,950, the private school still receives \$4,950. The Milwaukee public school system retains the remainder of the \$9,000 (approximately \$4,000) that was not spent on a child that attended the private school. Thus, between 1990 and 1999, the Milwaukee public school system has received exactly what it has requested; more money and smaller classes. Yet, it still has a 50% graduation rate, and of that number, the average grade is a D-plus. In my opinion, that is a crisis.

Obviously, more money or small classes is not the solution; especially when a child can attend a private school in the same neighborhood with the same demographic makeup, and have a 90% chance of graduating (85% of which go on to college) for almost half of the amount of money. Rather, the solution is the reformation of our educational system through such programs as school choice and school charters.

The anti-educational reform organizations also argue that private religious schools will attempt to proselytize and convert students to their particular religious beliefs. This argument is equally false. The school choice program contains an opt-out provision, which allows any student that attends a private religious school to "opt-out" of religious functions (e.g., prayer, mass or retreat). Moreover, the argument that private religious schools have only taken the top students is simply not true. The private religious schools do not have a choice in accepting students. They are required to accept the first children that register.

School choice and school charters have changed education in Milwaukee and, make no mistake, they have changed education in this country. The reformation of America's educational system is essentially a battle for the hearts, the souls and the minds of our children.

For us to sit by and do nothing to decrease the yearly 50% dropout rate is morally wrong. I think many of you remember in Dante's *Inferno* the sign that says, "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who remain silent in times of moral crises." We must continue to support school choice and school charter programs because such programs have been successful in improving the school systems that exist in America today.