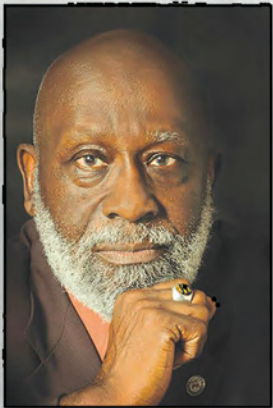




Voices of Color, Voices for Opportunity

Creating critical awareness of the real rank and file attitudes of African-Americans and people of color when it comes to having the power to make fundamental decisions regarding where their children attend school



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THE
EDUCATION
OPPORTUNITY
CAMPAIGN

Voices of Color, Voices for Opportunity

In 2017 the quest for educational opportunity was attacked by leaders of once reputable national civil rights organizations, and teachers unions, seeking to put a hold on charter schools that are a majority minority.

In July, the NAACP released a report calling for a moratorium on the expansion of new charter schools and organized a state-by-state lobbying strategy to limit charters. That month American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten made the explosive charge that opportunities for children outside of the traditional public school system were “polite cousins of segregation,” comparing parents and advocates to the southern segregationists of the past.

Then came the documentary entitled *Backpack Full of Cash* —a Hollywood production featuring box-office draw Matt Damon— that purported to show how charter schools across the country, and by example, in Philadelphia, were victimizing families of color.

Unable to win the argument over charter schools on merit, the establishments new tune to hum was clear: education reform equals racism. That coordinated message would strategically discredit the charter movement among those who were, in most cases, its staunchest allies— parents and children of color.

But truth has a funny way of winning out. Through its Education Opportunity Campaign, CER reached out to a few of the tens of thousands of parents, educators, business people, civil rights advocates and leaders of color to demonstrate the folly of the union and NAACP efforts. Their life long experiences, and commitment to ensuring every child, particularly children of color, has the opportunity and their parents the power to do what more affluent people and particularly white people do daily— move, or find new schools for their kids.

In the next few pages you’ll hear Voices of Color, for Opportunity, who are building a platform for African-American and Hispanic leaders to speak up, be heard and provide a counter-balance to aggressive and unfounded challenges to the freedom, opportunity and innovation that millions of students of color are now finding in a bevy of educational choice programs around the nation.

Through placement in major media outlets and distribution through CER’s communications networks the articles that follow have allowed us to reach more than **15** million people.

AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION LEADERS SPEAK OUT AGAINST NAACP ACTIONS

The following statement was issued today by CER directors David Hardy, founder and Chair of Boys' Latin Philadelphia Charter School and Donald Hense, founder and chairman of Washington D.C.'s Friendship Public Charter Schools, in response to the NAACP Task Force on Education Quality July 2017 Hearing Report.



The NAACP's campaign against charter schools is detrimental and disrespectful to all parents who struggle to ensure a quality education for their children.

Rather than embrace, and work to expand, the opportunities that charter schools represent to America's disadvantaged, and to families of color across the nation, the NAACP has chosen to stand as an obstacle, and work to stifle, a movement that, for thousands of children, is the greatest - and only - hope for achieving a quality education.

The association's recently released [report](#) is intentionally skewed to further a union-driven, anti-charter school agenda, and its "model legislation" effort is an outrageous political scheme to further support the union's agenda by undermining the voice and will of parents who are fighting for options for their children's education and for the right and freedom to choose.

The NAACP has a long history of fighting for justice and for individual rights that further opportunities, hopes and human dignity.

These efforts are the antithesis of that long fight, putting the association sadly, and uncharacteristically, on the wrong side of history.



School choice is crucial for African American students' success

T. Willard Fair, Opinion contributor | Sept. 21, 2017

The NAACP refuses to acknowledge the benefits that come from school choice and expects all people of color should follow their lead. I won't.

Once upon a time it may have been unheard of for the head of an urban league dedicated to the improvement of lives for African-American children to partner with a Republican to work on school reform. As part of one of his education reform efforts, Florida governor Jeb

Bush convinced me to help him go around that state in an attempt to get school choice legislation passed. I leapt at the opportunity because I was desperately concerned about the lack of quality educational options for children in Liberty City, a neighborhood of the city of Miami where a branch of the urban league is headquartered.



But that one achievement 30 plus years ago created a path that has changed lives for the children not only for Liberty City but children across the state. That is why I am compelled to speak up with deep concern and opposition to the statements of late by the NAACP, whose leadership has begun to ignore the reality of communities like mine, and indeed the conditions of African American students all over the country.

Here's what I need to say to them, to the people of this nation, to people of color — I am involved in the school choice movement because the future of my life and your life depends upon it. Starting the state's first charter school was one of the most significant accomplishments of my life. Because of our willingness to look beyond traditional divisions and leave beyond our tendency to only work with

those with whom we are comfortable, our children of color are closing the achievement gap. African-American students in charter schools are scoring 4% higher on reading tests than those in traditional public schools and Florida charter school students are more likely to attend college. Hispanic students do 12% better than their peers at traditional public schools. These are but two of the many indicators that point to increased success for students of color because their families were empowered to find schools that better met the needs of their children.

Far too many people and organizations, like the NAACP, refuse to acknowledge this. Their recent recommendations to curb charter schools, reduce their numbers and their independence, are wrong, and they expect falsely that all people of color should follow their lead because the color of your skin should dictate who you believe. I have worked a lifetime to change this misperception, to help people see that good policies for our kids do not have a color.

Too many of our African-American leaders simply defer their beliefs to organizations like the NAACP which once represented our people well. What they must do however is recognize times have changed and we have to have the honest discussions about what we were going to do about our children who continue to be failed by traditional institutions and bureaucracy.

Most important, even when trusted leaders talk about our children, the restoration process can be articulated only by those to whom the children belong, the parents. We can fight. We can mobilize. We can train. We can energize community members. But at the end of the day we have to have informed and trained and energized parents enough and in the right way to lead the charge for what is right for their children.

Time is running out. Choice now!! “Choice now” has to be one of the new refrains to “we shall overcome.”

We can't wait 20 more years. Time is most certainly running out. The circumstances that we deal with every day in Miami — and I dare say in every major urban area in the United States — are getting worse, not better. Time is running out for our communities, and we cannot wait another moment, let alone another decade to live without the kind of good choice among good schools that will eventually make a world of difference.

We need to give parents real power over the education available to their children, power that will take many different forms. Choice is at the top of the list.

T. Willard Fair is president of the Urban League of Greater Miami.

Times Record News

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Supporting black colleges helps charter schools

Johnny C. Taylor Jr., Thurgood Marshall College Fund | Sept. 29, 2017

The greatest country on earth is awash in fragile communities in which less than 20 percent of adults are literate, fourth graders lack proficiency in basic reading and math, jobs are scarce, and incarceration is as common as college.

These fragile communities are black, white, brown and yellow. They exist in places as different as Appalachia and Fort Lauderdale.



I know. I grew up in one. And had it not been for my mother's choice to take me out of a traditional public school and take advantage of the educational opportunity offered at a pilot magnet school, I would never have become a successful lawyer, corporate executive and now the head of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, which represents 47 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) — schools established when black students had no option other than segregated institutions. These schools have a long history of educating some of the nation's most influential and successful African-American doctors, educators, lawyers, business leaders and entrepreneurs.

It is through the lens of HBCUs that we have come to see that the plight of students trapped in poor schools, often in fragile communities, is not only an economic challenge for this nation, but an issue of national security.

We have a unique understanding at our colleges. We know what it takes to help students who are most economically disadvantaged and educationally vulnerable. And we know that when students are well prepared in primary and secondary grades, they are more likely to learn and to graduate from higher education than if they were disserved.

We also have a vested interest in ensuring that the children who arrive as freshmen on our campuses are extraordinarily well-prepared. Although some of our campuses have experienced enrollment growth recently, the challenge we

increasingly face is how to graduate young people who arrive as college freshmen woefully under-prepared academically. Currently, about 35 percent of HBCU students graduate within 6 years of starting their education. As federal and state governments refuse to fund remedial education for university students and demand higher graduation rates from post-secondary institutions, the only way HBCUs can survive is if the students who show up are college ready when they leave the PK-12 system.

Better parental choices are, frankly, a matter of life or death for many of our country's HBCUs. And the only way to impact that is to ensure that high quality secondary school choices abound

... and that parents are aware of the options that exist to help them take their families out of traditional district schools that have long failed their precious youth.

HBCUs have stepped up to the plate to provide this leadership. Howard University, for example, started a charter school called Howard University Middle School of Mathematics and Science, which is preparing the next generation of leaders for careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This area of focus is of particular importance because African-Americans receive just 7.6 percent of all STEM bachelor's degrees and 4.5 percent of doctorates in STEM.

Another example of HBCUs taking matters into their own hands can be found in Tallahassee's Florida A&M University, which opened the Developmental Research School in 1877. The Research School gives a nationally competitive college preparatory education to each of its students and serves as a state-of-the-art laboratory for education innovation. Throughout its 140 years of existence, the school has graduated thousands of students who have gone on to become leaders in their chosen professions.

These are some of the things we are doing to address fragile communities. If we don't do it, who will?

It's become clear the organization that once supported the greatest needs of our disadvantaged is no longer interested in that work. The NAACP recently came out and again called for a moratorium on charter schools, absurdly claiming that the promise of charters never materialized.

This was preceded by American Federation of Teachers boss Randi Weingarten's attacks on school choice, referring to charters as the "polite cousins of segregation."

We cannot afford this kind of issue-myopia in our society. The stakes are simply too high as fragile communities continue a downward spiral. The only solution is to improve educational outcomes and that begins with increasing school choices for parents. We have seen the dangerous domino effect if kids in these communities are forced to stay in failing schools.

And while the NAACP and Weingarten seem to be perfectly comfortable with that scenario, we are not.

We will continue to fight for these fragile communities. And if the NAACP continues to reject the educational opportunities school choice provides them, they risk becoming irrelevant — or worse — an enemy of the very people they claim to fight for.

Johnny C. Taylor Jr. is the president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, the largest organization exclusively representing the black college community. Follow him on Twitter at @JohnnyCTaylorJr.

Tribune News Service

The above article was so influential in the public debate that Wall Street Journal reporter Allysia Finley wanted to know more about Johnny Taylor's experience. Following is the result of her work:

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

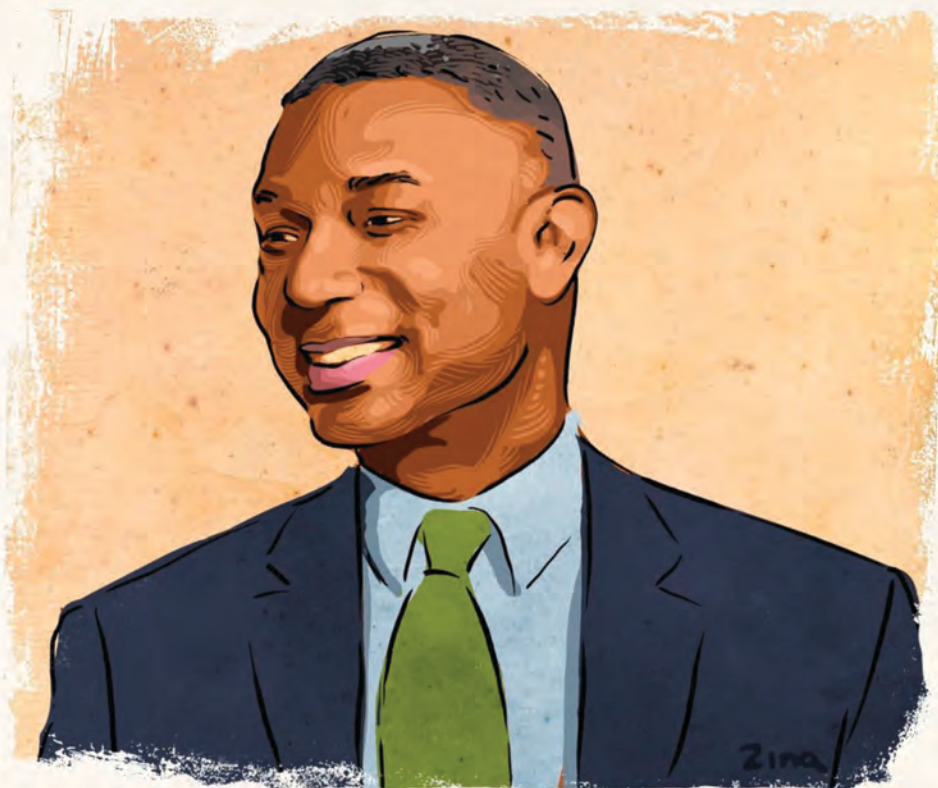
OPINION | THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

Why Black Colleges Need Charter Schools

Only 35% of students earn bachelor's degrees in six years. Why? Because traditional public schools failed to prepare them.

By **Allysia Finley** | Nov. 3, 2017

Charter schools are the “polite cousins of segregation,” in the words of Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Last year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for a moratorium on charters. Film festivals are screening “Backpack Full of Cash,” a pro-union documentary narrated by Matt Damon that portrays charters as separate and unequal institutions.



Pushing back against these invidious attacks is the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, an organization that represents 47 historically black schools. “We cannot afford this kind of issue-myopia in our society,” the fund’s president, Johnny Taylor, wrote in a syndicated op-ed this fall. “If the NAACP continues to reject the educational opportunities school choice provides them, they risk becoming irrelevant—or worse—an enemy of the very people they claim to fight for.”

Mr. Taylor will step down next month after a seven-year tenure during which he has relentlessly promoted charters as a lifeline for black students and a pipeline for historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs. On the heels of the fund's 30th-anniversary gala last week, Mr. Taylor sat down in a Washington hotel to chat about the challenges HBCUs face and why he thinks parental choice—he doesn't like the term "school choice"—is a solution.

First on the syllabus is a short history of HBCUs, which were established during the Jim Crow era to educate blacks who were then barred from many colleges and universities.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 authorized federal aid to HBCUs, a program known as Title III. But as states reduced their support two decades later, tuition at public HBCUs was rising.

The Thurgood Marshall College Fund was formed in 1987 to provide scholarships to students attending public HBCUs. (Its counterpart for private HBCUs is the United Negro College Fund, established in 1944.)

Lately HBCUs have been struggling with enrollment and recruitment because they no longer have a "captive market," as Mr. Taylor says. Over the past 40 years, the higher-education landscape has significantly changed as more schools have sought to diversify their student bodies. In 1977, 35% of black college graduates received bachelor's degrees from HBCUs. By 2015 that had declined to 14%.

Other schools are now offering generous financial aid and superior facilities to recruit black students, while the demographics of "economically fragile" communities have shifted. Five of the Marshall Fund's members—West Virginia State University, Bluefield State College, Lincoln University, Kentucky State University and the Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science—now enroll more white than black students.

"Sometimes you have to be careful what you pray for," Mr. Taylor says. "You wanted diversity, and guess what happened? You got diversity. We have two schools in Missouri, Harris-Stowe State University and Lincoln University of Missouri. Well, while people are screaming bloody murder for the University of Missouri to be more diverse, guess where it's going to get its students? It's cannibalizing our campuses." Here in the nation's capital, he adds, "Georgetown is going to Howard to pick off their best students."

Thus HBCUs tend to educate predominantly low-income populations, while well-to-do and better-educated black students attend more-prestigious schools. That makes it harder for HBCUs to raise money for scholarships and campus improvements. Mr. Taylor says he donates to his alma mater, Florida's University

of Miami, which is not an HBCU: “All of my money goes to Miami. I have no reason to give it to Howard. I didn’t go to Howard.”

A related challenge is low retention. Just 35% of HBCU students graduate in six years, compared with about 60% for all colleges. At seven HBCUs, less than 20% of black students earn a bachelor’s degree in six years.

The root problem, Mr. Taylor explains, is that traditional public schools are failing to prepare students. In “economically fragile” communities, many low-income students graduate from high school without basic literacy, and those admitted to HBCUs often need remedial classes. That presents HBCUs with a dual challenge. “When you show up to my college, I’m in trouble and you’re in trouble,” Mr. Taylor says. “I can’t get you through, and the feds are holding me accountable for graduation rates. And you’re frustrated because you feel like you were shafted for 12 years by the secondary-school system—and you were.”

Charter schools, he says, can do better, which would help HBCUs succeed in turn. Many charter networks, such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (often called KIPP), have placed a special emphasis on ensuring that their students finish college. Overall, only 9% of students from low-income families earn college degrees within six years; the rate for many major charter networks is three to five times as high.

For a copy of this article in its entirety, please contact pr@edreform.com!

Charter Schools Do Not Further Segregation

By Sonia Park | November 22, 2017

As a parent of a public charter school student in New York City, I take offense when I hear critics refer to the education reform movement as furthering segregation. That could not be farther from the truth.

What we are witnessing right now is, unfortunately, a highly-coordinated and well-funded effort led by Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, and the NAACP to discredit any school that disrupts the status quo. In fact, the new president of the NAACP re-emphasized its call for a moratorium on charter school expansion at a recent convention. And given the state of the education system today in America, we should be encouraging innovation in education, not stifling it, or worse, demagoguing those efforts.



But it is this constant barrage on charters that has made my work at the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition more urgent. The Coalition gives educators across the country a network to share best practices and highlight the rich learning environment that a diverse-by-design school offers.

It is also an opportunity to band together and fight back against critics that seek to mitigate the work we're doing and, by extension, prevent students from vulnerable communities from having the same high-quality education offered to their higher-income peers.

Segregation occurs when government assigns you by race to inferior schools. But when black parents, for example, choose a culturally affirming schools that has a similar population, that is not segregation; that is allowing parents to choose the education they believe is best for their children.

One of their most effective weapons is to highlight the student composition of some charter schools. However, the negative connotation associated with the buzz word “segregation,” which, used haphazardly, is meant to hurt the credibility of charters. And while I am certainly a strong proponent of school diversity, I am also attuned to reality.



The reality is that many charters, as well as district schools, reflect their location and community’s housing patterns. When comparing charter schools in these areas to their neighboring district schools, you will see similar demographic patterns.

But even more important than that is the gross misunderstanding or, in some cases, the nefarious use of the word “segregation.”

Segregation occurs when government assigns you by race to inferior schools. But when black parents, for example, choose a culturally affirming school that has a similar population, that is not segregation; that is allowing parents to choose the education they believe is best for their children. And oftentimes, that decision is based on the culture of the school more than any other factor.

But what makes charter schools truly unique and special is the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. In many of the communities I am fortunate enough to visit, a deliberate focus on creating a diverse and integrated learning environment is what makes many charters – and their school communities – thrive. And when we hear critics hammer away at “segregationist charter schools,” it is our responsibility to fight back against the broad brush.

The fact is that we view diversity as important to the larger school choice movement and we seek to celebrate that characteristic while understanding it is not a necessary characteristic for all schools.

In our communities, diverse schools can invigorate and strengthen urban neighborhoods by breaking down the cultural walls that divide us. And diversity can be achieved through deliberate efforts via recruitment, admissions policies and school design. The impact can be powerful, providing greater opportunities for students to learn from one another and boost achievement.

We are seeing that play out in New Orleans, a city that has witnessed an enormous transformation in education since Hurricane Katrina, and it is diverse charters in New Orleans leading the way. Three members of the Diverse Charter

Schools Coalition outperformed both the statewide and district averages in the 2017 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) assessments and are in the top ten highest performing schools in all of Orleans Parish. One of the schools, The International School of Louisiana (ISL) was also recently recognized by the Coalition for its academic performance and received the Achievement Gap Award for demonstrating exceptional commitment to successfully closing achievement gaps.

There are stories like the one in New Orleans playing out around the country as more and more charter schools consider the advantages of a diverse learning environment. But unlike the education establishment, it is not something we seek to force on all schools. We believe in choice – parents should be able to choose the best option they see fit for their child’s education and educators should be able to choose the school design that best fits their community’s needs. So while the charter movement continues to exchange ideas, collaborate and understand that empowerment is the key to long-term student achievement, Randi Weingarten and the NAACP can continue their march to irrelevance.

Sonia Park is the executive director of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition and also served as a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education.

The Inquirer

DAILY NEWS philly.com

Philly families of color are hurt by NAACP's charter school stance | Opinion

by Sylvia P. Simms, For the Inquirer | January 9, 2018

Imagine you're an African American single mother working two jobs to make ends meet. Your mission in life is to provide a safe upbringing for your children, which includes access to a high-quality education.

All across Philadelphia, and in dozens of other cities in the United States, this is a realistic challenge. I spend the majority of my time meeting with families such as this, listening to the concerns of parents learning about the horrific school conditions into which kids are forced, and sensing the hopelessness of the situation. That's because, unfortunately, for these vulnerable communities, the fight for a better education is met by powerful oppositions.



For these families, with limited resources, it's difficult enough to engage with the education establishment. It is controlled by the teachers' unions, which have long been on the front lines of the crusade against charter schools. By itself it is a formidable enough opponent to severely restrict the voices of the vulnerable.

But now, these families face attacks from an organization that should be by their side. The NAACP has become a forceful partner in the battle against charter schools, declaring for a moratorium on charters for the second year in a row. The NAACP's mission is supposed to be to ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of rights of all people and to eliminate race-based discrimination. When it comes to education it is doing the exact opposite. By opposing charters, the NAACP is holding back black people, starving them of the educational opportunity they deserve and setting far too many on a dangerous life path by forcing them into failing public schools.

For many families, charter schools are a lifeboat, and if the rope is cut, kids will drown in a life of despair.



So what are these families supposed to do? Well, for one thing, they now clearly understand the battle lines and should no longer be fooled into thinking the NAACP has their back. But they do have strong allies. The power of the families can be felt when we band together as a community and fight for what's right.

That is what inspired me as a former school-bus aide to fight for better educational opportunities for my children and grandchildren — first as a member of the Philadelphia School Reform Commission and now as the leader of Educational Opportunities for Families, a Philadelphia-based advocacy group that harnesses the power of like-minded parents from across the city who believe that a child's access to a high quality school should not be determined by his or her address. And these parents include anyone who is taking care of a child, whether it be grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, or neighbors.

If parents in vulnerable communities like North Philadelphia are going to be successful in changing the direction of their kids' lives, they must partner together. It would simply be impossible to create the kind of change we seek given the opposition we face unless that happens. And that means building consensus among diverse groups of parents with similar objectives: increasing awareness of school choice issues, educating them about the battle for the future of education, and supporting parents who are speaking up to education and political leaders.

It is these education and political leaders in Philadelphia and Harrisburg who continue to make it difficult for parents who just want the opportunity to send their kids to a good school. Instead, these powerful forces would rather keep the status quo where education opportunity is determined by zip code, which we know is a recipe for continued poverty and, worse, an accelerant for the school-to-prison pipeline that sets these communities back decades.

Our opponents are well-organized, well-funded, and have the resources to outlast us. They do not respect us either. They think we will eventually pick up our losses

and go back to being quiet, accepting that a poor education is our families' destiny. But what they don't have is the passion and the tenacity of that single mother working two jobs whose only care in life is to provide their children with a better way forward. One of those may not win this war, but banded together, I like our chances.

Sylvia P. Simms, a former member of the School Reform Commission, is executive director of Educational Opportunities for Families.

RealClear Education

Hollywood Takes On Philadelphia Schools — And Fails

By Sen. Anthony Williams, David Hardy & Sharif El-Mekki | January 30, 2018

As native Philadelphians who have pursued careers — as a state legislator, a founder of a local charter school, and a school principal — focused on empowering individuals and communities, we feel an obligation to Philadelphia’s children to ensure they receive high-quality education. In Philadelphia that has meant establishing charter schools and providing scholarships to support parents’ ability, and right, to decide how best to educate their children.

In an ideal world, this issue would not be so pressing. All schools would excel academically, provide excellent environments for learning, and be accessible to kids from all corners of the city. But we are far removed from that ideal. Many of Philadelphia’s schools fail to provide anything approaching a quality academic experience. Instruction is below par; students are not challenged academically; and the environment can be dangerous. Hence, the growth of charter schools and the community and parental empowerment they foster.

A documentary being screened in cities around the country, and shown here to the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), purports to show how our public schools — and public schools everywhere — are being forced to close because charter schools are stealing “their” money.

The notion that the closure of several Philadelphia schools was caused by greedy charter school operators is ludicrous. The primary culprit was a long-accumulating budget deficit (totaling \$1.35 billion), brought on by bureaucratic bloat, inefficiency, and declining school enrollment — which saw more than a quarter of school seats



empty and left the district with badly underused buildings in need of millions of dollars in repairs.

The notion that all Philadelphia's schools would be great if funding weren't being diverted to charter schools is also ridiculous. Many schools remain inadequate — in terms of academics and security — despite infusions of money. Schools closed for poor performance and low enrollment were refunded and reopened, despite the fact that there was (and is) little demand for their continued existence, as reflected by enrollment at just 20 percent of the school's capacity.



The film is stunning for yet another reason: Actor Matt Damon, who sends his children to private schools, narrates it. The fact that Damon speaks from a vaunted position of privilege and options, while lending his voice to a film that attacks the concept of choice for people who have virtually none, is hypocritical — compounded by the fact that the initial local screening of the film was held at a private venue.

The documentary is not a discussion or debate over how to meet the challenge of a failing public school system. It's an attempt to protect the status quo no matter how badly it fails communities, parents, and children. Rather than an attempt to start an important dialogue, the film proffers slick Hollywood propaganda that does nothing to reveal truth or document the reality of what's going on in Philadelphia.

The filmmakers engaged no working-class families who have chosen to send their children to private schools on scholarship or those forced into underperforming schools because of where they live. The film does not even gesture toward a balanced conversation. Instead, it denigrates individuals trying to remedy a bad situation and parents trying to do what's best for their children — all because parents who are given the freedom to choose weaken the power and influence of the establishment.

The film pays nostalgic homage to a bygone era. But the system the filmmakers defend today is not the system we knew. Many schools today are unsafe,

uninspiring, and unable to challenge academically gifted children or to help poor performers. Yes, many teachers and administrators remain dedicated and hardworking, and many schools strive to succeed and improve. Yet, too many still fail.

That's the simple, hard truth. And with a decades-long track record that inspires zero confidence that improvement is on the horizon, that truth that requires a forceful, decisive response. The response for many parents has been to pull their kids out of a failing system and send them to schools that work.

The documentary, funded by the American Federation of Teachers, is touted as a public service; it's not. And that's the film's final shortcoming: It makes the case for the status quo without addressing how to establish an effective learning environment for students and teachers and how to give parents access to it. The answer lies in the efforts already underway in Philadelphia to create opportunities for all types of schools to serve children.

Anthony Williams is a Pennsylvania State Senator, representing the 8th District. David Hardy is a Founder of Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. And Sharif El-Mekki is a Principal at Mastery Charter Schools.

RealClear | Life

In 1999, Civil Rights Leader Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker joined with Steve Klinsky, noted philanthropist and education reformer, to found the first charter school in the State of New York, the Sisulu-Walker Charter School of Harlem. Dr. Walker passed from this life on January 18, 2018 stilling one of the great voices for freedom and opportunity in America, but leaving an equally great legacy that will live far into the future.

This moving tribute by Steve, a chronicle of the incredible life and leadership of one of the charter school movements' greatest advocates and activists, is included here to honor Dr. Walker, to thank him for his life's work, and to inspire all who continue the struggle.

In Memoriam: Wyatt Tee Walker

"A great man is gone," wrote the poet e.e. cummings, "Tall as the truth..."

By Steve Klinsky | January 2018

...I had the unexpected pleasure in the middle of my life of getting to know Dr. Walker as a friend, partner and mentor – a most unexpected pairing because I am a white, “Wall Street guy” from Michigan who would never have expected to cross lives with a civil rights icon and Harlem minister.

But I had left my Wall Street job in 1999 to start a charter school – the first and longest lasting in the State of New York – and Dr. Walker was searching for a path to bring better education to the kids in Harlem and elsewhere. We teamed up together to found that first school on 115th Street between Lenox and St. Nicholas, in the “Center For Community Enrichment” building at the back of his Canaan Church; a building which had been built through weekly tithes from his parishioners.

The school was originally called (at Dr.



Walker's suggestion) the Sisulu charter school in honor of Walker's friend and Nelson Mandela's ally, Walter Sisulu. Later, the school was proudly renamed the Sisulu-Walker school in honor of Dr. and Mrs. Walker as well. The story of the school and of our work together to start it was the subject of the book *A Light Shines in Harlem* by Mary Bounds.

I had heard about Dr. Walker's reputation before I ever met him. In early 1999, when I began to work on charters, I had been traveling among New York's most educationally under-served communities, searching for allies and a school location, accompanied by a young theological student named Marshall Mitchell.

Marshall's father was the Philadelphia minister Frank Mitchell, who had been a colleague of Dr. Walker's, and Marshall urged me to meet Walker.

The decision was not a simple one. Dr. Walker was an imposing figure, who was known among his fellow ministers as a man who did not suffer fools gladly. His precise diction and manner could hit like a lightning bolt when he so chose.

He explained his desire to have a school. The local public schools in Harlem had been failing for decades; the children were not being educated. Starting a successful school was a great financial, regulatory and technical challenge, but partnering with me under the charter law could give him the means he needed.

The charter law had passed under Gov. George Pataki's leadership in New York just months before. Walker and his fellow ministers, including Al Sharpton and Ruben Diaz had been vocal advocates for the change, and united the charter school movement with the civil rights movement from the very beginning. "The schools had to get better," Walker later said, "I saw that as an extension to my work in the South." And he also said, "I'm a disciple of Martin Luther King. I think I know as much as anybody of what he would support." And Walker believed King would clearly support charter schools.

Once we agreed to join together, Walker and I spent several months meeting regularly to agree on the school design and logistics, usually accompanied by his chief of operations at Canaan, "J.P." (the exceptionally capable Judith Price, who passed away several years ago), and by Marshall Mitchell.

That summer, Marshall and I spent more than one night in the great room in the basement of CCE, "Embassy Hall," persuading local parents to trust their kids' future to this new and unproven school and education idea. As much as anything, it was the community's knowledge that this was "Dr. Walker's school" that bought us enough credibility to be listened to at all.

Eventually, the school would outperform the other public schools in its central Harlem neighborhood. We rang the school bell as the first charter kindergartner in New York State entered our front door on September 8, 1999. And by June 22, 2005, as that same class graduated from Sisulu-Walker as fifth graders, 90% tested at grade level or above on the state exam for reading (almost twice as many as in the nearby traditional schools) and 77% were at or above grade level in math, vs. 30% for the traditional Harlem schools.

He continued to cheer on the charter school movement and to remain my friend from a distance. When Mayor Michael Bloomberg came to Sisulu-Walker School and to Canaan's sanctuary to give a speech in support of the charter movement, Dr. Walker wrote me in a never before published letter (extracts of the letter only):

Dear Steve:

YOU HAVE WON THE BATTLE! The pronouncements by Mike Bloomberg have verified the success of the Charter School movement in New York. ...It is akin to us getting rid of segregation in the body politic of the nation....Now the real struggle begins to fashion our strategy for the future. It will be a daunting task. We must plan an attack similar to Project C Birmingham. ...I wanted to get this word to you ASAP!...Grace and Peace Wyatt Tee Walker

EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY CAMPAIGN REACH OVER 4 MONTHS:

OUTLET	TOTAL ARTICLE REACH (Daily Readership)	POTENTIAL VIEWS (Online Monthly Visitors)
Wall Street Journal	8,470,000	42,400,000
USA Today	9,680,000	102,200,000
Philly.com / Philadelphia Inquirer	466,105	6,240,577
Real Clear Education	37,000	150,000
Sacramento Bee	630,000	5,752,155
Fredricksburg.com / Free Lance-Star	N/A	396,000
Wichita Falls Times- Record	300,000	1,200,000
HBCU Digest	(Annual Reach)	2,000,000
TOTAL	19,583,105	158,338,732

SOCIAL MEDIA REACH: A targeted social media awareness campaign generated 94,684 Facebook impressions and 82,763 Twitter impressions.

Join the Chorus

Voices for Opportunity abound. In CER's new podcast, **Reality Check w/Jeanne Allen**, students, parents and advocates for choice and opportunity shared their views about why determining their own path of schooling - and using the proverbial *backpack full of cash* that is normally allotted to zoned public schools whether they succeed or fail - is the right thing to do.

Denisha Meriweather, a School Choice Liaison at the U.S. Department of Education, failed the third grade twice before enrolling in a private school thanks to the Florida tax credit scholarship: "I went from D's and F's to straight A's. I was surrounded by people who cared about me. Helped me apply to college. Something I didn't know was possible."



Walter Banks, a school choice alum and current college student: "I firmly believe that the proper education has the ability to change lives, to break the poverty cycle, especially in African American families."

Friendship Public Charter School Students, Shaun, Albany, Michaela, and Holiday: Voiced their excitement and enthusiasm about their educational experience at Tech Prep. They are especially grateful for the opportunities their school has given them.



Former Friendship Public Charter School teacher and now **Director of Talent at Friendship, Shakira Hemphill**: "...when I decided to come to Friendship I knew that this would give me a chance to let parents as well as families know that you can make a decision. And you can provide a high-quality education and students do not have to be boxed in. You do not have to mandate that they have a specific education. I believe that what we do at Friendship is really out of the box."

A Note to Policymakers

The challenge confronting legislators and policymakers in their work to transform education is enormous. The orthodoxies of the status quo, the demands of the establishment's special interests, and strength of the power elite all create a cacophony that only serves to misdirect discussion, stifle debate, and block progress toward change. To disagree with them incurs insult. To take action to address their failures invites aggressive political attack.

The voices raised here are usually drowned out by well-funded organizations that strive to preserve the status quo, no matter decades of ever-accumulating failures. Those groups and organizations that fail to see the need to allow children to escape the tyranny of school assignment by zip code, and that refuse to believe that giving every child his and her own "backpack full of cash" is indeed the path to equity and freedom. And who dishonestly ascribe hateful motives to the work of education reform advocates and to the hopes of families and children.

At CER we believe that freedom, flexibility, innovation and options provide opportunities that allow all children to realize their right to a quality education, and their hope of achieving the American Dream. There are thousands of Americans who share that belief, and we stand beside them to help further those conviction and amplify their voices for change.

Whether you're a legislator, policymaker, parent, or business leader - and whether you need support, guidance, information, or action - call us. We're proud to stand with you and anxious to help.



Center for Education Reform
1901 L Street, NW
Suite 705
Washington, D.C. 20036
800-521-2118

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