

**SECTION THREE:**

**Grassroots Perspectives on  
Market Mechanisms**



# **A Parent's Perspective on School Choice**

**BARBARA LEWIS,**

*Scholarship Parent, Indianapolis*

What I can tell you about school choice is that, if it hadn't been there, I don't know what I would have done. When I was young, my family sacrificed to put me through private, Catholic school education, and I had always hoped to send my children to one. But being a single mom, I couldn't afford it. All my children started school in the public system. I got discouraged when, one by one, I saw they were not getting the education they deserved.

My oldest son, Alphonso, had always loved school and learning. As a little boy, he attended the federal Head Start pre-school program and an optional kindergarten class before he started grade school. At home, I worked with him teaching him numbers, ABC's, and tying his shoes. So when he started first grade, he was ready for school.

At the beginning, Alphonso was excited about school, but slowly his attitude changed and one day he didn't want to go back. He started making up excuses, saying he was sick, or that he didn't want to go to school. It was kind of scary. I saw the light going out of my child's eyes for education. His teachers told me that he was an above average student who wasn't meeting his potential. When his grades slipped, I asked

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This chapter is an edited version of the speech Barbara Lewis made at the Fraser Institute Conference, School Choice: Dispelling the Myths and Examining the Evidence, April 1, 2000.

for extra credit work, or any other help to improve his grades, but I got no response.

They constantly said they wanted parents to be concerned, parents who wanted to get involved. Well, they had me. But as much as I went to the school and tried to get help, I was shut out. They didn't want me there asking questions. "What do you want? What are you doing here?" was the response I got. I replied, "You asked for someone concerned. You asked me to be here. I'm trying to support the teachers; I'm trying to get help for my child."

I heard about the Educational CHOICE Charitable Trust from a co-worker. I applied for it and got a voucher for Alphonso. He used the voucher to get a place at Holy Cross Central Catholic. The first few months weren't easy for him. There was a lot of discipline to get used to, and that was new for him. But once he settled in, his grades stabilized and his attitude changed. He was happy, and he made friends. Everyone around him wanted to learn, just like he did, and that made me happy. What also made me happy was the school was right down the street; he got to walk to school every day with friends in his neighbourhood. His brother and sister got to go to the same school, too. They all got to walk to school together and have the same friends, in the same neighbourhood.

When our family moved from the inner city to the suburbs I got another perspective on the public school system. We moved to Lawrence township when Alphonso was a sophomore in high school and my other two children were still in Holy Cross Central Catholic School. I did a lot of research on the public schools in the area. All the literature said they had great public schools: they had a great curriculum, students did well, and because they were public schools they were free. When we moved I was happy that my two younger kids could go to these public schools that were so highly regarded. Alphonso had been accepted to one of the best high schools in Indiana, a college preparatory school called Cathedral High School, so I sent him there and he is doing very well. I felt confident about sending my daughter, who had A's and B's at Holy Cross, to the suburban public school.

On the first parents' evening, I visited the school and met the teachers for all her classes. I remember going to each class and giving every one of her teachers three phone numbers: my home phone number, my work phone number and my cell phone number. "If anything is wrong, if Erika steps out of line, if she doesn't turn homework in, you'll be able to reach me," I told them. "There is an answering machine on each and every one of those phone lines."

Erika's first semester was fine; she got her usual A's and B's. But when she brought home her second semester report card I was totally shocked. I didn't understand how a student could go from A's and B's in one semester to straight F's in the next. It took me thirty days to contact the teachers and set up meetings with them all. I reminded them that before she came to this school, I had come to each one of them and given them numbers to call me. I hadn't received one call. No one had told me that homework hadn't been turned in; no one had told me she was misbehaving.

What got me after that—after I tried to get help from the teachers to no avail—was that their next step was to suspend Erika. When they suspended her, I went back to them again and I said, "Okay, we know there is a problem because there is no discipline for Erika. She knows she's going to get away with misbehaving because you're not going to call me. If you did call me I could get her straightened out. We could fix the problem. But instead of helping her and helping me get her grades back to where they were, your solution is to put her out of school for two weeks, which is going to put her behind even more."

Well, they didn't really care about that logic. They had no answer for it. Those were their rules, their guidelines, so this pattern continued. I waited until the end of her sixth-grade year, Erika's first year at that school. All through the year I told my daughter, "If you don't straighten up, you're not going to pass. You've got straight F's on your report card. There's no way they're going to pass you. You're going to be in summer school and you're going to miss your summer."

When the end of the year came, I had no letter from the school about summer school, and I had nothing from the school saying she had to repeat the year. So I called the school. I said, "I'm just checking to see if Erika Lewis has summer school this year or if she's going to the seventh grade." And they checked and said that yes, she had been assigned a seventh grade counsellor.

I said, "Excuse me, but my daughter has straight F's on her report card. How can she have a seventh grade counsellor?"

"Well, she's being promoted to the seventh grade," they said.

"How can that be?" I asked. "How can you promote a child with straight F's on her report card?"

"Well, she passed her IStep test last September," they told me.

"But the IStep test was in the beginning of the year."

"Well, that's what we go by," they said.

So there was nothing that they cared about during the rest of the year. She could have stayed home for the whole year after the IStep test

and she would have passed.

We went through this for a year and a half, and at that point, I had had enough. I decided to move my daughter to a private school. Just this week, as a matter of fact, I got her into St. Andrew's Catholic School. I no longer have my choice voucher but things have gone well for me in my career and now I can make that choice on my own for my children. And after all the problems with the schools and realizing that no matter what I do or what my child does, they're going to keep passing her, whether she can read or whether she can write, or whether she has any chance for a good life at all. They don't care about her.

Their excuse is that they've got about 300 kids in the seventh grade and they can't watch all the kids, they say. I told them that I wasn't asking them to watch all the kids, just one. I said, "If you're marking their grades you must know there is something wrong. She went from an A to an F, so give a parent a call or send a letter. Do *something*."

She just started St. Andrew's Catholic School this week and already I have seen an amazing transformation in her. I dropped Erika off Thursday for her first day of school, and for the first time when I picked her up, I saw a smile on her face. I asked her how her first day had been and she said she was happy. She said the kids were all nice. The new school is small and the students are all really close. They were really nice to her and tried to make her feel comfortable and welcome. Everyone in the school felt that way; they made her feel special and feel that she belonged somewhere. And, just as importantly, she knows there are rules that she has to follow now.

Parents know what's best for their children, and we need the opportunity to choose what's right for them. If a school is too big, if a school is too violent or teachers don't understand what is going on in the children's lives, parents need the opportunity to make a change. They need to be able to send their children to a school they feel will be better for them. And with the organization I started, called FORCE, that's what we're trying to get Indiana legislators to see.

If you have any doubts about the quality of public and private schools, I suggest you go and look at a few. Maybe that will give you insight into what's going on in them and how much parents need your help. If it weren't for school choice, I don't know where my oldest son would be or where my daughter would be headed. Alphonso has come such a long way. He wants to go to Notre Dame College and he's got a career plan. In Catholic School they teach him confidence, they teach him that he can do even better than he is doing right now. That is all I want for my children. And that's my perspective on school choice.

# **A Student's Perspective on School Vouchers**

*ALPHONSO HARRELL,  
Scholarship Student, Indianapolis*

I would like to begin by thanking everyone for having me here to tell you about my experiences in public school and private Catholic schools.

When I was in public school I felt like I was being denied something and was not living up to my full potential. The problem was that nobody at school cared whether I learned anything there or not. My mother saw there was a problem and applied for a voucher from the Educational CHOICE Trust so I could go to another school.

When I won the voucher and started at Holy Cross, things were very different and I didn't like it. I was the only minority in my class. There were fourteen or fifteen people in the class, and I was the only Black student. As I say, I didn't like it. There was more discipline. At public school, they let us know that if we showed up, we'd probably pass. At Catholic school, we had to earn our grades, and I wasn't used to that. But as the year went on, the school grew on me and I started to see that the teachers really cared about us. I started making new friends, I started doing better in school, and I started liking it. School was pretty much the main thing in my life. I liked going to school, and I didn't like the summer holidays any more because I didn't get to see my friends.

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This chapter is an edited version of the speech Alphonso Harrell made at the Fraser Institute Conference, School Choice: Dispelling the Myths and Examining the Evidence, April 1, 2000.

As the year went on I got on the honour roll, which I had never made in public school. Now I am in eleventh grade and I look at my old friends in the same grade in public school and I see a huge difference between us. I mean, they're down on one level and I'm way up on another. They can barely do the math that I do. They're in beginning math, Algebra 1, and I'm going into Algebra 2. If I transferred back into a public school next year with all the credits I've earned and all the extra-curricular activities I've done, I would only have to take two classes a day, and I would graduate half a year earlier than everybody else.

These things that I have accomplished, I've done because of two people: Mr. Rooney, who started the Educational CHOICE Charitable Trust, which paid for my school voucher, and the main person in my life, my Mom. I don't know where I would be if she hadn't made the choice to put me in this program.

I think there are a couple of things a kid needs to get by in life. The first thing a kid needs is a parent who cares, a parent who asks you every day how you're doing in school. "What kind of grades are you getting? How do you like your teachers?" my Mom would ask me. I'd usually answer her saying something like, "I don't know, I'm doing okay," the usual answers. But I always knew somebody cared and that helped me do a little bit better. And the other thing a kid needs is for a teacher to care enough to put up with you even though you might not be on your best behaviour or having your best day. The teacher and the school have to look out for you. Most teachers have the attitude that they'll come to school and teach the students who want to learn. If you don't want to learn, you just need to show up to class and the teachers will pass you anyway.

That's not how it is in Catholic School. If you don't want to learn, the teachers call your parents, they talk to the principal, and they talk to you. They stay on top of you. They didn't let me fall through the cracks, the way they did in public school. I almost fell through the cracks but luckily I had a Mom who cared enough to make sure I got the education I needed. Now I'm in high school, preparing for college, and I see my friends who are preparing to work at Burger King for the rest of their lives.

I love all the opportunities that I get to speak about my experiences because it gives other people hope. They can see that an ordinary kid from public school who was not doing well can get a better education just by going to a private school. Now, because of CHOICE, I've got a chance to excel at one of the best high schools in Indianapolis and a

whole bunch of doors are suddenly open for me. I can go to just about any college I want in Indiana just because I go to this school. My school cares about grades. They can kick you out just for not having a 2.0, which is a "C" average. That motivates us to work a little harder.

Another good thing about my school is that I can go to school without worrying all the time. Am I going to get beaten up? No. Do I have to worry about getting shot at school? No. Do I have to go through a metal detector? No. At public school the kids do worry about that kind of thing. They don't worry about what kind of homework they have; they worry about what's going to happen to them after school because they're not safe. I'm in a safe environment so I can put more energy into my grades and extracurricular activities instead of worrying about what's going to happen to me after school.

And finally, I'd like to say that when you have someone who cares about you, even just one person, it can make a real difference for you. You just have to let students know that you care because if a kid feels that nobody out there cares about him, he'll lose self-esteem and maybe he might do something just to get your attention. We say, "Knock, knock, is anybody home? Is anyone paying attention to me?" If the answer had been no, for me, I'd probably be in trouble right now and not on my school's Honour Roll.

If, however, everybody had the experience that I had in public school and Catholic school, and could choose between them, I guarantee everybody would choose the Catholic school. I have been at many school CHOICE lotteries where half the parents in public school came to try to win a voucher to get their kids into a private school. If public school is so much better than a private school, then why are all these parents trying to pull their kids out and put them into a private school?

Public schools get so much more money than any of the private schools I know, and the private schools are doing a much better job for students. It doesn't make sense. So instead of wasting money on a public school, trying to help a losing cause, you should help a winning cause and give more money to private schools.

And that's my speech.

