

## NAACP: “No” to School Choice

*Once-Revered Civil Rights Organization Places Special Interest Politics Over Interests of African-American Parents and Schoolchildren*

By Luke Naegele

*Summary: Why does America’s oldest and largest civil rights group oppose school choice initiatives that will let low-income minority parents give their children a better education?*

**F**ew issues in education are as hotly debated as school choice. During the past decade school choice programs in Milwaukee and Cleveland have generated emotional debate, then litigation, which culminated in last year’s U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*. In that case, the Court ruled that it was constitutional for state governments to provide public funds to parents to send their children to private and religious schools. Recently a new battlefield opened up in, of all places, Washington, D.C. The city’s Democratic mayor supports a Republican initiative in Congress to provide federal funding to D.C. parents, permitting them to opt-out of the city’s failed school system. The wall of opposition is crumbling. New research shows school choice works, minority and urban communities are growing vocal in its support, and key liberal legislators like Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) are breaking ranks with Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and the teacher unions to urge experimentation with this education reform proposal.

Anti-choice organizations are running out of arguments and running scared. Professional groups of public school administrators are afraid families will leave the public schools. Teachers unions fear they will lose their monopoly hold over public school employment. And secular leftist groups are frightened that parents will



NAACP president Kweisi Mfume opposes school choice vouchers. But Washington, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams supports voucher programs.

choose to send their kids to religious schools. Clearly, for these groups it’s all about power—their interests are threatened.

But one group is fighting school choice, and most people don’t have a clue why. The NAACP is the nation’s preeminent civil rights group, and it opposes school choice.

Black families have come a long way because the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was established in 1909 to work for the political, educational, social and economic equality of African-Americans. Fifty years ago its name alone gave them hope. Yet black Americans are learning that the NAACP today opposes an education policy that

lets inner-city low-income minority children escape failing public schools, and more and more of them wonder whether the organization is straying from its historic mission.

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# Organization Trends

The acclaimed “nonpartisan” NAACP has become almost an arm of the Democratic Party. Recent comments by NAACP chairman Julian Bond confirm the organization’s partisanship and its extreme hostility to the Bush Administration. At its 2003 annual national convention in Miami, Bond observed that the Republican Party appealed “to the dark underside of American culture, to that minority of Americans who reject democracy and equality.” Bond continued: “Their idea of equal rights is the American flag and the Confederate swastika flying side by side.”

Despite Bond’s assertion, “We are and always have been nonpartisan,” NAACP president Kweisi Mfume, a former five-term Democratic congressman from Maryland, underscored the organization’s partisan ties and political clout. When three Democratic Party presidential hopefuls made excuses for being unable to attend the convention Mfume denounced them to the cheering delegates: “In essence, you now have become persona non grata. Your political capital is the equivalent of

Confederate dollars.” The three no-shows—Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-MO) and Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH)—rushed down to Miami to publicly apologize to Mfume and the convention.

The incredible display of partisan in-vective shows how the current NAACP relates to the national political parties. The organization goes to bat for Democratic Party candidates on Election Day, and they defer to its wishes.

## Organization and Finances

The NAACP has a rich and turbulent history beginning with founder W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). He opposed Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on creating black opportunity through industrial education in the early twentieth century and instead urged blacks to seek equality through politics. In the 1940s and ‘50s NAACP legal director Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993) used the courts to bring about the end of legal segregation. In 1954 Marshall successfully argued against school segregation before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. A year later local NAACP member Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white patron on a segregated Montgomery, Alabama bus. Her defiance sparked a bus boycott led by a local pastor, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Parks and thousands of other NAACP members helped create the civil rights movement that transformed American politics and race relations.

Throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, the NAACP’s reputation soared and its membership exploded. Today, the NAACP has over a half million members, who are organized into more than 2,200 chartered branch affiliates in all 50 states, Japan and Germany. A 62-member national board of directors oversees the affiliates, which are organized into seven regions. NAACP members annually contribute over \$3 million in membership dues, which accounts for about 10 percent of the organization’s average annual revenue.

Despite its successes, the NAACP suffered reverses and endured scandal in the 1980s and ‘90s. Before Mfume became

president and CEO in 1995, the organization was \$3.2 million in debt and his predecessor, Benjamin Chavis, was dogged by a sex scandal that led to his firing. Mfume overcame the debt and announced to a reconstituted national board: “The NAACP for the first time in a long time is operating in the black.”

Headquartered in Baltimore, the NAACP and its special contribution fund have gained financial ground because corporations such as UPS (\$805,000), Ford Motor Company (\$270,000), General Motors (\$265,000), and Wachovia (\$1 million) have become generous donors. In 2001, the 501(c)(3) NAACP and its Special Contributions Fund, a separately organized 501(c)(3), had over \$45 million in combined revenue and \$27 million in assets. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, established by Thurgood Marshall in 1940, has been a separate and independent organization since 1957. In 2000, it had \$9 million in revenue and over \$41 million in assets. It has received \$8 million from the Ford Foundation since 1998.

## Coalitions Against Choice

It’s perhaps understandable that the NAACP supports political candidates who favor more government spending programs supported by many black Americans, but what explains the NAACP opposition to school choice?

The answer appears to be that the politics of special interest coalition-building takes precedence over the interests of black schoolchildren. For over a decade, the NAACP has worked with groups like the National Education Association, People for the American Way (PFAW) and the American Civil Liberties Union against school choice.

In 1997, the NAACP joined forces with PFAW to create a new coalition, Partners for Public Education (PPE), headed by Mfume and PFAW president Ralph Neas. It has a single purpose—fighting school choice. In 2000, the Ford Foundation gave the PFAW Foundation \$100,000 for PPE. The Deer Creek Foundation in St. Louis (2001 assets: \$54 million) gave \$75,000, and the Albert A. List Foundation contrib-

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uted \$80,000 to PFAW “for challenging the religious right.” PPE invariably opposes school choice in cities with some of the nation’s worst public schools—Milwaukee, Jacksonville, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

The PPE website has come up with four reasons why vouchers won’t work: They won’t give kids a better education; schools, not students, get the “choice”; voucher schools are unaccountable to taxpayers; and vouchers violate the First Amendment by subsidizing religious schools with public money.

The NAACP and its allies have repeated these arguments through court after court to stop local school choice

paint “vouchers” in lurid colors as some strange, extreme right-wing concept aimed at damaging schools. Their tactics have often succeeded in confusing parents and communities desperate to develop new educational opportunities for their children.

But the Friedmans’ idea has taken hold. Currently, there are choice programs in place in six states—Colorado, Florida, Maine, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin—that allow parents to take public funds set aside for education and use it to pay for tuition at a public, private, or religious school of their choosing. School choice programs of this sort are often described as “vouchers” or “opportunity scholarships.” There are restrictions. For example,

books, supplies, computers, tutors, and, in some instances, tuition and transportation. Forty states have laws allowing charter schools, which are public schools that operate independently of local school board control. Often they have a curriculum and educational philosophy very different from other schools in the system. Charter schools give parents choice and introduce competition within the public school system. Another form of school choice is the private scholarship. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have privately-funded scholarship organizations including Capital Partners for Education, which enable fortunate parents to tap into private philanthropy to educate their children.

The NAACP is willing to accept charter schools and privately-funded scholarship programs. However, it opposes public funding for private and religious schools. Yet research shows the benefits of vouchers. In 2000, professors Paul Peterson (Harvard), Patrick Wolf (Georgetown), and William Howell (University of Wisconsin) reported their findings after a two-year study of school voucher use in New York, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. The report concluded that black students who used vouchers to switch to private schools had significantly higher test scores than students who remained in public schools. The study also found that voucher students spent more time on homework and were less often involved in incidents of fighting, cheating and vandalism. NAACP leaders were unmoved.

Amazingly, the Colorado branch of the NAACP recently sued Governor Bill Owens for signing into law a voucher program. When fully implemented this program could assist 20,000 K-12 students and their families. Northeast Denver has over 30 failing public schools and 48 percent of the schools’ students are African-American. Rev. Gill Ford, the NAACP regional director, complained that the plan was sponsored by a white Republican lawmaker and signed by a white Republican governor who used minority children to promote it.

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programs. But they hit a roadblock last year when the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Zelman* decision ruled that Cleveland, Ohio’s program was constitutional. Still, the NAACP refused to surrender. It announced, “This decision does nothing but further undercut the concept of universal quality public education.”

### Opposing Vouchers

Economist Milton Friedman coined the term “voucher” forty years ago, when he described his policy ideas for education reform in his book, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1963). In 1996, Friedman and his wife Rose established the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation to provide research and funding for school choice initiatives across the country. Teacher unions and liberal groups have tried to

in Milwaukee, a child’s family must be well below the poverty level. Florida’s opportunity scholarship program lets parents opt out of schools that have failed to achieve state assessment benchmarks twice within a four-year period. The state allows per-pupil money that would have been spent at the “failing” school to be transferred to a better performing public or private school the parents choose.

Vouchers are not the only form of school choice. Six states—Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania—offer tax credits or tax deductions for education expenses or for contributions to scholarship organizations. Parents can claim a tax credit/deduction on their state income taxes for approved educational expenses including

## The Battle Within Black America

NAACP officials, liberal politicians, and the education establishment are trying to stonewall the good news about school choice. But school choice works, and more and more black leaders are saying so. This is no secret to the NAACP. In 1999, the national NAACP ousted Willie Breazell as the organization's Colorado head after he announced his support for school choice and complained that the "status quo leaves the poorest kids who need the most help...trapped in our very worst schools." Breazell said the overwhelming majority of the 900 members of the Colorado NAACP wanted him to stay. But under pressure he and three of the 11-member state executive committee resigned. Breazell told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I was kind of lynched, so to speak.... If you don't have the group-think mentality you won't last."

Opposition to school vouchers is no longer a party line issue. For instance, former Rep. Floyd Flake (D-NY), a liberal, six-term African-American member of Congress, co-sponsored a 1997 voucher bill for New York City despite opposition from his party and the Congressional Black Caucus. Flake told black ministers and educators skeptical of school choice in Queens, "When a white person kills a black person, we all go out in the street to protest. But our children are being educationally killed everyday in public schools and nobody says a thing." Flake now currently serves as senior Reverend at Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, Queens and remains committed to school choice.

Dr. Howard Fuller, a Marquette University professor of education, is another school choice proponent. Fuller was superintendent of the Milwaukee public school system. In 2000, he founded the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), which is dedicated to fighting the false NAACP claim that vouchers are "a concept of exclusion and selective opportunity." BAEO literature points out an obvious reality: "School choice is widespread unless you're poor." Fuller says parents who are not poor can choose to send their children to better performing

private schools or move to neighborhoods with good public schools. BAEO wants families in poverty—and according to the U.S. Census Bureau just over 22 percent of African-Americans are poor—to have the same opportunity.

Kaleem Caire is a 32-year-old married father of four as well as the former president and CEO of BAEO. *Organization Trends* interviewed him in his Washington, D.C. office, where he is now executive director of the K-12 Education Initiative with Fight for Children, Inc, a charity providing financial support for the education of Washington-area children. Caire says, "the BAEO is busy reaching into the urban communities and pulling out the people who need the help most and supplying them with honest information and choices."

BAEO is expanding rapidly and now numbers 31 chapters in communities across the nation. Its 27-member board of directors is comprised of parents, community leaders, educators, and former policy makers from over 20 cities across America, and it includes Willie Breazell and Rev. Floyd Flake. The Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation has been an important BAEO supporter. Recently the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced that it will give BAEO \$4 million over the next five years to build 15 small high schools in sites yet to be determined.

Caire has felt the sting of insults thrown at reformers like himself but he has too much spirit to let the slurs get to him. He understands that black families have had good reason to suspect political promises, but he believes "honest, positive, and information driven campaigns among the people" can overcome their skepticism.

As for the NAACP, Caire worries that it "unfortunately doesn't resonate among the people anymore and that's frustrating." He adds, "The NAACP has lost its roots with the people."

## NAACP: Frozen in Opposition

Black community support for school choice is putting the NAACP at odds with prominent Democratic politicians, particu-

larly big city mayors. John Norquist, mayor of Milwaukee, Kurt Schmoke, former mayor of Baltimore, Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta and, most recently, Washington, D.C. mayor Anthony Williams—all of them Democrats—want to give low-income parents the right to choose where their child attends school.

Former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young stunned an audience and received a barrage of criticism when he declared his support of vouchers at an NAACP awards banquet. He said, "If you're in an under-achieving school, then you have a right to seek a voucher to go to a school where you can be guaranteed some level of achievement."

D.C. mayor Anthony Williams also surprised the political establishment by his U-turn on school choice. (D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton called him "a sellout.") But the test results of the 67,000 K-12 students in public schools in the nation's capital show that money alone can't fix public education. Washington, D.C. spends the third highest amount of money per-pupil on its schools in the nation, yet 70 percent of pupils in the District score at or below the basic level on standardized reading tests and 71 percent score below basic level in math.

Some Democrats at the national level also are nervously edging their way toward school choice. In a July 22 opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, Senator Feinstein wrote, "If the mayor [Anthony Williams] wants this [voucher] program, it should be given the chance to work." That's encouraging, but don't expect to see school choice in the Democratic Party platform. Bill Clinton supported school choice—until he became President. Senator Lieberman was always a fan of vouchers—until he joined Al Gore on the Democratic ticket in 2000. (However, he now supports the D.C. voucher bill.)

This year it's John Kerry's turn. In 1998, the Massachusetts Senator said, "Shame on us for not realizing that there are parents in this country who . . . today support vouchers not because they are enamored with private schools but be-

cause they want a choice for their children. They want alternatives, and seeing none in our rigid system, they are willing and some even desperate to look elsewhere.” But don’t count on him saying that now that he is running for President and looking for support from the NEA and the NAACP.

The NAACP needs to listen more carefully to the African-American community. A 2002 opinion poll by the black-oriented Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies showed 57 percent of African-Americans support school vouchers. More importantly, 67 percent of black households with children and 70 percent of African-Americans ages 26 – 35 are school choice supporters.

Still, the NAACP refuses to consider school choice. The NAACP “opposes the use of taxpayer dollars to pay for school vouchers because it will mean fewer dollars for public schools,” says Kweisi Mfume. “They [vouchers] don’t solve the problems or the needs of public schools or the students who attend them. It’s a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

That argument is wrong says the pro-choice Institute for Justice, the public interest law group that argued the *Zelman* case before the Supreme Court. Its research shows that overall public school spending in Milwaukee and Cleveland grew substantially after those jurisdictions introduced tax-supported school choice programs. Per-pupil spending in Cleveland and Milwaukee also increased—from \$7,970 to \$10,352 and \$6,064 to \$11,090 respectively.

The NAACP’s Mfume resorts to other fear tactics to undermine the data on school choice. “We can’t allow our nation’s schools to be divided once again by skin color,” he has said. In an amicus brief in the *Zelman* case, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund took the same tack. Programs like Cleveland’s “contain the seeds of educational resegregation and lack safeguards to prevent this result.” But Jay Greene, a scholar with the Manhattan Institute, has analyzed a national sample of public and private school 12th grade students. He

finds that those in private school are actually more likely to be in racially--mixed classrooms than their public school counterparts. According to 2000 data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, 55 percent of all public school 12th grade students are in classes with fewer than 10 percent or more than 90 percent racial minority students. By contrast, only 41 percent of private school students are in similarly segregated classrooms.

### One Final Question

If the NAACP is right and school choice does not benefit African-American children, then why do African-American parents continue to participate in school choice programs or place their names on waiting lists full of minority students whose parents are searching for a way out of public schools. Milwaukee’s choice program has grown from 341 students at seven schools in 1990-91 to 11,670 students at 102 schools in 2002-03. Cleveland’s scholarship program grew from 1,994 students in 1996-1997 to 5,147 students in 2002-2003. In 1999, the private New York City-based Children’s Scholarship Fund endorsed by Floyd Flake received 1.25 million applicants for 40,000 scholarships to attend private schools. Washington mayor Williams got it right when he said, “I don’t know whether [vouchers] is the right thing for our city in years to come but right now, today, at this moment, I believe I have an obligation to represent all the children of our city.”

If the NAACP could find the courage to break with the teachers unions and other left-wing special interest groups it could again become a bold advocate for the education of low-income African-Americans. If black parents are happy with their local public schools they don’t need to use the voucher. But why leave poor black students on the sidelines when other students are free to choose? That’s the question the NAACP should be asking itself.

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# BrieflyNoted

Anti-war groups are exploiting the debate over whether the Bush Administration misled the nation about Iraq's nuclear capability and have demanded that Congress investigate the government's war policy. David Cartwright, co-founder of **Win Without War**, says, "There needs to be a full-scale, independent investigation into all this controversy. We've been pushing this concept of accountability for weeks now." **MoveOn.org** is spearheading a petition campaign that has led more than 400,000 people to urge Congress to investigate Administration claims. Says Bill Dobbs, media coordinator at **United for Peace and Justice**, "This is going sour for Bush. People are realizing that not only is there a great likelihood that the truth was messed around with, but they're questioning something that is costing us upwards of \$3.4 billion a month and a lot of American lives." But groups supporting the President include **Citizens United**, which held a 15,000-strong "Rally for the Troops" in April. It has sent the White House 100,000 letters from Americans supporting the President's policies. Citizens United president David Bossie says, "It's vital that we have a role that defends the president and educates the American people between the president and his detractors."

On August 7 former vice president **Al Gore** denounced Bush Iraq policy before 600 people at a New York University event sponsored by **MoveOn.org**. The crowd cheered Gore, who said the Bush Administration "routinely shows disrespect" for the "honest and open debate" that produces the truth. Gore also said, "Millions of Americans now share a feeling that something pretty basic has gone wrong in our country, and that some important American values are being placed at risk." White House spokesman Claire Buchan dismissed Gore's criticism, saying, "I think the American people know the president's commitment to the security of the United States and winning the war on terrorism."

In August, the **Center for Constitutional Rights** filed a federal court suit challenging the constitutionality of the **USA Patriot Act**, the anti-terrorism bill passed by Congress after September 11. The Center, founded by radical attorney William Kunstler (1919-1995), claims the law violates free-speech protections by outlawing "expert advice and assistance" to groups the U.S. labels terrorist. The case involves Americans who have advised Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, groups declared terrorist by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Plaintiffs attorney Nancy Chang says, "In its rush to pass the Patriot Act just six weeks after the September 11 attacks, Congress overlooked one of our most fundamental rights: the right to express our political beliefs, even if they are controversial." The **American Civil Liberties Union** also filed a suit challenging the Patriot Act provision allowing the government to secretly seize business records in terror investigations.

**Jesse Jackson** has added former Chicago Democratic congressman **Mel Reynolds** to the staff of his **Rainbow/PUSH Coalition**. Reynolds was among the 176 criminals who received end-of-term pardons from President Bill Clinton. He served time in prison for wire fraud, bank fraud and lying to the Federal Election Commission. He also concurrently served a five-year sentence for sleeping with an underage campaign volunteer. Reynolds' new job at Rainbow/PUSH: Youth counselor.

