

Truly no child left behind

On February 20, 2002, the United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in favor and opposed to the Cleveland, OH voucher plan for poor students known as the Zelman v. Simmons-Harris school voucher case. In 1995, the Ohio legislature passed a law providing vouchers of up to \$2,250 for students in Cleveland to attend any non-government school in Cleveland or a state-run school in surrounding districts. The state-controlled schools in the surrounding districts refused to accept the poor children from Cleveland into their schools leaving only private institutions from which to choose. After additional state legislation created the opportunity for some of those non-religious private schools to convert to charter school status, the remaining choices available for parents who qualified for the program were in religious institutions. It is on that point - state funds "supporting" private religious schools - that the Court has heard the case. A decision is expected in early summer.

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, the highest ranking federal educator in the land and, himself, the former public school superintendent of Houston, has issued the following official statement on the case:

Throughout America, far too many children are trapped in failing schools. These children need and deserve access to a quality education, and their parents should be empowered to help them achieve their

dreams. That's precisely the focus of this case.

Those who oppose empowering parents to select the best school for their children argue that school-choice programs would somehow hurt the system of public education. I reject this argument.

As a nation, we must focus squarely on the needs of children and parents, not on perpetuating the status quo, especially in those areas where the system has failed to adequately serve its students. If I have to choose between protecting the system and educating the children, I'll choose the children every time. We must help those children who need it most, especially in our competitive global economy.

The outcome of this case will lift the constitutional cloud hanging over school-choice programs and may well determine the educational destiny of millions of American children. I will continue to be a steadfast advocate for improving all our schools and for empowering parents to select the best possible education for their children.

Later, in an appearance at a symposium in Philadelphia of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), the Secretary called for expanding parent options in education. Excerpts from the secretary's speech are provided below. A link to

WFIS gratefully acknowledges assistance from the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) in preparing this article.

the full text is available on the Council for American Private Education's (CAPE) web site at <http://www.capenet.org/new.html>.

Choice is not some experimental idea. In the 21st century, it is an expectation. It is the way we run our lives. When people see a monopoly these days, they're surprised. They quickly look for an alternative....

While America enjoys a voyage of choice and freedom, our education system missed the boat. It's surprising that a country that says it values education hasn't powered it up with the energy of choice. But it's not just a surprise. It's a disgrace....

My support of choice [as superintendent in Houston] surprised some people because I was in charge of a huge system of public education. But I knew what you know: that giving parents greater choices and kids more chances does not hurt public education, it strengthens it. It brings us closer to equality....

Here at the birthplace of American liberty, let us renew our commitment to American liberty, especially liberty in education. One thing we know about liberty is that when people get it, however high the price, they never want to give it back. The more liberty we give to parents, the more they will understand and value it. The more we tell people about freedom, the more they will demand it. You are the prophets of parental choice. You have a great American message. Preach it boldly....