

Statement of Justice Shorter

“The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: A Pioneer for School Choice Programs Nationwide”

July 20, 2015

Please Note: *The following statement is reflective of my personal experiences as I remember them to be true. All views and opinions are entirely my own and stem from a genuine interest in the enhancement of educational opportunities for low income students as well as students with disabilities.*

My educational experiences have taught me the importance of capacity, clarity and equity. In the fall of 2004 my sight began to worsen and I realize that for the foreseeable future I would be recognized as someone who is legally blind. At the time I was already enrolled in the Choice program as a student at Messmer Catholic High School, a school where I was surrounded by caring individuals who were fervently committed to my academic success. Nevertheless, in those early years neither Messmer nor my family had the financial resources to ensure I received all of the accommodations needed to support my educational endeavors.

My mother and I therefore decided to research resources for students with disabilities and independently sought out funding from private donors. Thankfully, I was able to reconnect with a former mentor who shared my story with a foundation which granted me additional scholarships. The funding equipped me with several pieces of assistive technology. This equipment coupled with the unwavering support and attention I received from teachers and staff allowed me to not only participate but to excel in each of my courses. Messmer was later able to secure additional financial support from donors which immensely enhanced my educational pursuits and access to adequate accommodations.

After graduating from Messmer I went on to attend Marquette University where I earned a degree in Journalism with minors in Justice & Peace Studies as well as entrepreneurship. As an undergrad I studied Community Development & Social Entrepreneurship in Cape Town South Africa in addition to Peace & Post Conflict Reconciliation in Uganda and Rwanda. Next month I will earn a master’s degree in Sustainable Development with an emphasis on International Policy from SIT Graduate Institute in Washington DC.

As a result of my educational experiences, I have come to passionately believe in capacity, clarity and equity.

1. **Capacity:** My family, mentors and the staff at Messmer firmly believed in my capacity to compete academically and conquer seemingly insurmountable odds. Students with disabilities can indeed achieve their educational and professional aspirations. We have the capacity to contribute to classrooms, communities, the city of Milwaukee, the state of Wisconsin, the United States of America as well as the rest of the world.
2. **Clarity:** Initially, my mother and I were quite confused on what to do and where to go concerning educational issues associated with my disability. Accordingly, students with disabilities and their families must be properly informed about their rights and educational options. The Department of Public Instruction should provide all schools participating in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program with the information needed to enhance parental awareness related to academic choices and available resources for students with disabilities.
3. **Equity:** While participating in the Parental Choice Program I received the same financial voucher as students without disabilities which did not account for the increased expenses affiliated with my visual impairment. Correspondingly, I believe that students with disabilities who are voucher recipients should have equitable access to state aid. The additional expenses associated with educating students with disabilities must therefore be considered and effectively integrated into the Parental Choice Program. This would provide choice schools with the financial resources needed to ensure that students with disabilities are reasonably and consistently accommodated.

I agree with the principle premise of the Parental Choice Program. We should all be able to make the best choices for ourselves, our families and our future. However, the problem of students with disabilities not having access to adequate accommodations when attending private schools on vouchers funded by the state of Wisconsin must be rectified. Schools and parents should be secure in the knowledge that funding from the Parental Choice Program will complement rather than complicate the educational choices of students with disabilities. This program clearly has the ability to bring forth transformative change within the city of Milwaukee. Moreover, I believe that if we focus on capacity, clarity and equity the program will truly have the potential to serve as a model for what a dedicated state of educators, parents, legislators and supporters can do to ensure the empowerment of students in general and students with disabilities in particular.