

Testimony of Brother Bob Smith
“The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: A Pioneer for School Choice Programs Nationwide”
July 20, 2015

As a young child walking on a spring day after the 1968 riots in Chicago, Illinois something happened that changed my life forever. Walking down Madison street with the smell of recent fires still in the air I remember hearing a loud “bang,” and almost immediately seeing a white teenage boy running across the busy street without stopping to check the traffic. Seconds later, a large number of black students chased the boy as cars screeched to avoid hitting the kids. A student caught the first kid and pushed him to the ground as the angry group kicked and then literally walked over the helpless boy. As I watched in horror, my mother and her female friend pushed me against a building wall and said, “stay here.” I can clearly remember as I watched this senseless act wondering, “why doesn’t somebody do something?” The answer came from my mother and her friend. These two ladies started pulling and pushing kids away from the helpless boy, and formed a protective shield for him until staff from the high school and later police and medical help arrived.

My mother and her friend spoke to the police and we continued down the street. The things I remember are seeing ‘footprints of blood’ on the street of kids who walked over another kid just because he was white, and being grateful that my mother was my mother. While I don’t remember talking about what happened (other than telling my brothers and sisters later), this act of courage from two women who cared only about helping someone who needed help has shaped most of who I am as a person and what I have done with my life.

Tonight, I am happy and honored to share the experiences I have been fortunate to have seen during the last decades here in Milwaukee, and in states across our country. School Choice is a lot of things - and it is important that we keep making sure that everyone knows the truth whenever there is a conversation about this most important educational option for all students. School Choice can be delivered through tax credits, home schooling, cyber-schooling, charter schools, nonsectarian schools, public schools, religious schools and vouchers. Charter schools ARE public schools, and public schools are also part of the Choice program. My interest in the concept of School Choice came in my early years at Messmer. There was rarely a week that passed where we didn’t have parents or guardians coming to our high school desperate for a better education. Most of the families were ethnic minorities and were low-income. They could not afford tuition, but wanted a future for their kids! I read the papers and listened to Governor Thompson, Representative Williams and Mayor Norquist, and I couldn’t understand why a parent was being blocked from making a free decision about where their child could best be educated. I knew the history of the GI Bill, and knew that a military veteran could use their funds to attend any educational institution - public or private, and could attend religious colleges. A veteran could also use their funds to attend a seminary if that was their choice. I knew that Milwaukee was filled with schools that served special needs students or students who were expelled from public schools, and some of these were religious schools/institutions.

It seemed to me that the argument/debate was about “public money” being used for religious purposes, but if that were the sole logic being used - why could or would money from religious citizens/people of faith be used for public purposes? The fact was and is that the money is public, but does not belong to the government - it belongs to the people. They can, should and will have a say in how their money is used - especially as it relates to the most important thing they have - their children! It is also important to remember that poor people have as much to say about how funds are used as others, and an

argument could be made that they should have a greater stake in making sure that their children receive a high quality education.

A quote that Shakespeare said that has become a favorite of mine is, "tis an ill cook that will not taste his own soup." The play that this quote came from was simply warning anyone who had the soup that they would die because it was poison! If the cook would not taste it... This applies to some people who are the most aggressive in opposing School Choice - those who decry vouchers, but in fact, practice another form of School Choice. I find it odd that people who work at and for Public Schools would pay for their children to attend private and religious schools when their kids could attend school for free! Depending on where you live in the United States, this figure of public school teachers and administrators sending their children to private and religious schools could be anywhere from 30 to 60%. But, the greater hypocrisy comes from people who hold the highest political offices in our country, and who could have many levels of security if safety was a concern about where their kids went to school. I speak of many people running for President/Vice President who decry private and religious schools and feed at the trough of the NEA, but send their own kids to private schools. The silence is deafening that no one has ever questioned this blatant repeated act that the poor could not exercise in Washington, DC.

The truth is that this battle for some has never been about education - it has always been about jobs, money, and God. While many have been credited with the idea or concept of vouchers, it is a bit ironic that an out of print book, *The Three Archbishops*, talked about the history of Milwaukee in the early 1900's. There was a convention in Milwaukee for Catholic School Educators and Archbishop Sebastian Messmer gave the keynote speech. He said in his simple and humble way, "let the public schools test our Catholic students, and if they do as well or better than their kids - let the money follow the students." That, was probably one of the earliest calls for vouchers, but it was met with silence for decades.

There never was a question in my mind about the chances of success of School Choice in Milwaukee. Having diverse choices for parents, putting the power in the hands of parents, and making it clear that ALL schools needed to provide high quality education or the punishment was going out of business. It is why we have Burger King, McDonalds, Wendys, Culvers and many other places that specialize in hamburgers. If a store does not provide high quality service a customer can and will take their money down the street to a competitor. They will also probably share the story of bad service with family, friends and neighbors. You won't lose one customer - you will lose 10!

Our nation cannot afford mediocre education anywhere and for anyone. People who cannot see the connection between this and many of the societal ills plays a dangerous game. High quality education is the key to freedom, success and citizens who make our country a better place. The question that I asked during the horror of watching a human being being stepped on in 1968, "why doesn't somebody do something," is being asked and answered again. The courage of those supporting School Choice is admirable.

Our small Choice program of less than 1000 students in the early 1990's has grown to over 22,000 students in Wisconsin and includes religious schools of all faiths. Our actions have inspired over 27 states to start Choice programs, and some of these programs have been led by Democrats. This is not about me, but about WE. School choice now and forever.