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ABSTRACT

This collection of articles on school choice profiles five Hispanic and Black families who were not willing to wait for promised improvements in local schools. The articles begin with a discussion of minority parents who are quietly embracing school choice, examining their restlessness with the public schools, the charter school push, mixed public opinion, the generation gap in opinions about charter schools, and challenges with school choice. The five family stories focus on one family's satisfaction with the amount of personal attention provided by their charter school; one family's opportunity to leave a failing public school; the spiritual and moral foundation provided to one family by their charter school; one black family's decision to exercise their options and find a private school where their children would be exposed to racial and ethnic diversity every day; and one mother's efforts to reconcile her family's long-term commitment to public education with her passion for school choice. (SM)

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Public Debates, Private Choices

Education Week v21 n14 Dec 5 2001

Karla Scoon Reid

and

Robert C. Johnson

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

December 5, 2001

Public Debates, Private Choices

By Karla Scoon Reid
Education Week

Public Debates, Private Choices

- Introduction
- Minority Parents Quietly Embrace School Choice
- Basking in Personal Attention
- A Ticket Out of Public Schools
- A Spiritual and Moral Foundation
- Exercising Their Options
- Coming to Terms With History

School choice continues to capture attention in policy and political circles, the subject of debates, research papers, polls, and election campaigns. But it is also of keen interest to American parents, especially to African-Americans and Latinos living in urban districts where finding a first-rate education for their children can be a struggle. Once considered public education's core supporters—and therefore not likely to welcome alternatives to regular public schooling—some of these minority parents have instead quietly embraced charter schools, publicly financed voucher programs, and voucher-style private scholarships. Their decisions often put them at odds with the organizations and politicians that have traditionally championed their causes.

For when it comes to the education of their children, the five families profiled here all say, ideology and politics come in a distant second. None of these black or Hispanic families was willing to wait for promised improvements in the local schools.

All remain supportive of public education, however. Some say they simply wanted an alternative for a particular child that was not available in district schools, and they still send their other children to public schools.

Whatever these parents' concerns and perceptions, their families' stories go beyond impersonal numbers and the constraints of poll questions to help explain the appeal of school choice. Their experiences help illuminate the realities that lie behind the politically charged debate over the growing array of educational options available to or proposed for students in the United States.

"We're not listening to these parents," contends Vernard T. Gant, the director of urban school services for the Association of Christian Schools International in Colorado Springs, Colo. "They know what they're doing."

Funding for these stories was provided in part by the Ford Foundation, which helps underwrite coverage of the changing definition of public schooling.

PHOTOS: Melody and Dwight Moody, with daughter Avery, 2, made a reluctant decision to send their children Ryan, 9, left, and David, 6, to private school.
—Mike Simons for Education Week

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Minority Parents Quietly Embrace School Choice

By Karla Scoon Reid
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Introduction

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Coming to Terms With History

The critics of vouchers and other free-market-style approaches to education should be able to rally African-Americans and Latinos against the movement for alternatives to traditional public schooling.

After all, the most typical advocates of wide-open school choice are conservative Republicans and libertarians; the staunchest opponents tend to be Democratic and liberal, and can usually count on blacks and Hispanics as political allies.

But in cities where tuition vouchers, charter schools, and large-scale private scholarships are available, such options have proved popular and are quietly attracting more minority parents. People of color are now emerging as vocal and visible leaders in the school choice movement, and parents are increasingly listening to their messages.

School choice, its advocates say, can no longer be dismissed as a white, conservative movement that takes advantage of unwitting minority families.

"It's easy to make the complaint if all of the folks leading the school choice movement are white, and all of the complainants are black," said T. Willard Fair, the president of the Urban League of Greater Miami, which operates a charter school. "Now, you've got people on the other side who are credible, who are legitimate, who have a history of being concerned, and have no economic or political interest that is obvious."

Proponents of school choice have yet to sway large numbers of parents of any racial or ethnic background into their camp. About 90 percent of America's students attend public schools. Polls and surveys on school choice often yield conflicting results. And voters in California and Michigan soundly defeated voucher initiatives last year.

Warren S. Simmons

Yet there's a strong undercurrent of support for alternatives from African-Americans and Latinos who have gravitated toward school choice—from charter schools, which are considered a less radical step, to publicly financed vouchers that pay for tuition at private schools. Many minority parents are impatient at what they see as the plodding pace of school reform; they're concerned that their own children won't benefit from long-term improvements to the current public school system.

Some national education-watchers believe that minority parents' growing interest in school choice demands greater attention.

"This new movement from communities of color and low-income parents is certainly a threat to leaders in public education," said Warren S. Simmons, the executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in Providence, R.I. "If these parents opt out, who is the constituency in these urban areas?"

Signs of 'Restlessness'

In Dayton, a total of 6,000 students are expected to be enrolled in charter schools in that southwestern Ohio city by next fall. About 1,000 more Milwaukee students are using state-financed vouchers to attend private schools this year, bringing the total number of students using vouchers to 10,700. The private, New York City-based Children's Scholarship Fund received 1.25 million applicants for 40,000 scholarships to attend private schools in 1999.

What do those number mean?

"It's a sign of the restlessness with the state of play in public schools," acknowledged Hugh B. Price, the president of the New York City-based National Urban League and an opponent of publicly financed vouchers for private schooling. "I understand the restlessness of people."

That sign has yet to be addressed by the leadership of civil rights organizations, politicians, and teachers' unions, argues Terry M. Moe, the author of *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public.*

"Their own constituents—poor people and minorities—are the ones in the worst schools and the biggest supporters of school choice," Mr. Moe asserted, citing his research that found that high percentages of African- Americans, Hispanics, and low-income people backed vouchers. "Under normal circumstances, they would support their constituents."

Hugh B. Price

Mr. Moe added that the teachers' unions, whose interests are rooted in the current system, seem to be the key obstacle to advancing the dialogue about school choice in political and civil rights organizations.

But John H. Jackson, the national education director for the Baltimore, Md.-based National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said its members want high-quality education in their neighborhoods, not

an unstable "corporate movement," as he calls the push for choice.

Bob Chase, the president of the National Education Association, also disputed Mr. Moe's contention. He pointed to the overwhelming support the union received from minority voters in its successful efforts last year to defeat the voucher proposals on the statewide ballots in California and Michigan.

"We're not out of touch," Mr. Chase declared. "According to the votes, we're not out of touch. Those are the facts."

'It's a sign of the restlessness with the state of play in public schools.'

Hugh B. Price, President, National Urban League

While Mr. Moe conceded that the unions were unlikely to change their positions on vouchers, he said that in the case of civil rights groups, older leaders would be replaced by a younger generation more supportive of such options.

In fact, new organizations have emerged during the past year to take up the charge for minority parents who support a wide range of choices in education. The Black Alliance for Educational Options, which reports a membership of 1,000 people and 23 chapters across the country, was founded in Milwaukee last year to push for school choice and public school improvement.

Kaleem Caire, the president of BAEO, which is now located in Washington, said that his organization's base is growing while the NAACP's base is aging. BAEO launched a national advertising campaign this year promoting the benefits of vouchers and charter schools. ("Black Alliance Weighs in With Pro-Voucher Campaign," May 30, 2001.)

"If black folks sit on the sidelines of the school reform effort," Mr. Caire said, "we're going to be left behind again."

Similarly, the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, which was formed this year, hopes to help Hispanics gain access to vouchers, charter schools, and magnet schools to improve students' academic achievement.

Robert B. Aguirre, who is a board member of the San Antonio Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation, which provides privately financed vouchers for children living in that city, founded the Hispanic council. The new organization must also be concerned about the quality of public education, he said, since most Hispanic children attend public schools.

Still, Mr. Aguirre, a local businessman, added that the focus of the Hispanic council is clear: "We're not concerned about the system. We're concerned about the kids."

Charter School Push

As such groups add a new voice to school choice advocacy, some civil rights organizations and community leaders are helping to establish charter schools for minority students. Some school choice advocates say this trend shows that they are warming to education alternatives.

For example, several local affiliates of the National Urban League

operate charter schools. NEA affiliates, with support from the national organization, run a handful of charter schools, which are independently operated public schools.

The Washington-based National Council of La Raza, which advocates on behalf of Hispanics, has raised $10 million to create and support 50 charter schools nationwide that will be aimed at Latinos. ("Hispanic Group Quietly Initiates Big Charter Push," Nov. 21, 2001.)

And the ASPIRA Association, a national organization based in Washington devoted to the education and leadership development of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, has five charter schools and plans to open more.

'This new movement from communities of color and low-income parents is a threat to leaders in public education.'

Warren S. Simmons, Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform

"We're definitely not abandoning our work with traditional public schools," said Ariana Quiñones, the education director for La Raza. "But we do think that sometimes you do need an option that is more readily available."

'Leaving Door Open'

Johnny Villamil-Casanova, the executive vice president of ASPIRA, said his organization has worked for 35 years trying to improve public schools by providing students with mentors and tutors and by training parents to run for school board seats. He described running charter schools as a natural extension of that effort, not a departure.

But while support for charter schools in such quarters is growing, most of the groups involved are wary about government- financed vouchers, at least for now.

Mr. Price of the Urban League opposes the use of public money for private schooling because of what he sees as a lack of accountability.

Although La Raza is opposed to vouchers in their current form because they often do not cover the entire cost of tuition, Ms. Quiñones characterized the group's voucher position as "leaving the door open for discussion." ASPIRA has no official position on vouchers.

The emergence of the national black and Hispanic organizations pressing for school choice—and now the National Council of La Raza's charter school effort—show the development of a school choice movement independent of the established minority leadership, said Howard L. Fuller. He is a former superintendent of the Milwaukee public schools and one of the first prominent African-American proponents of vouchers and charter schools.

"The 'leadership' is saying one thing, but under that, there's a movement of people coming to a different opinion," according to Mr. Fuller, the president of BAEO's board of directors. "Over time, it reaches the leadership."

'You've got the minority community beginning to emerge on this issue.'

Michael Watson,
Vice President
Children First America

Yet school choice proponents who attempt to show the diversity of the movement often cite the same names of African-American supporters: Mr. Fuller, Mr. Fair of the Urban League in Miami, and Dwight Evans, a Philadelphia Democrat and Pennsylvania state representative.

"It's absolutely a select few" African-Americans, said Michael Watson, a vice president of Children First America, a Bentonville, Ark.- based organization that offers private school scholarships to needy students nationwide.

"But there's a crack in the door and that crack is going to widen," he said. "You've got the minority community beginning to emerge on this issue."

Both Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington-based research and advocacy group that supports school choice, and Mr. Fuller said they see a change in the minority community based on reactions at their own speaking engagements.

Ten years ago, Ms. Allen said, she was booed at a National Council of La Raza event. Now, people at least listen to Ms. Allen and Mr. Fuller at such gatherings.

What Ms. Allen describes as the myth that a "bunch of white, public-education-hating people with horns" are pushing school choice is finally being exposed, she said.

"Little by little, they're introduced to people who don't have horns," she added.

Mixed Messages

Recent public-opinion surveys about charter schools and vouchers yield varying results, making it difficult to determine with precision the prevailing mood about school choice among minorities.

A 1999 survey of 1,200 adults by Public Agenda, a New York City-based, nonprofit opinion- research group, found that 68 percent of African-Americans and 65 percent of Hispanics "strongly favor" or "somewhat favor" government-financed vouchers.

A National School Boards Association-sponsored survey of about 1,211 adults this past May found that 41 percent of the African-Americans polled "strongly oppose" vouchers, while 19 percent "strongly favor" them.

The National Urban League's "State of Black America Survey for 2001" found that 58 percent of the 800 black adults polled said that education tax dollars should be used solely for public schools. But 52 percent of the respondents favored the creation of charter schools.

Generation Gap

Meanwhile, a generation gap seems to be emerging among African-Americans when it comes to opinions about school choice.

A poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington think tank that focuses on black issues, found that about 57 percent of the African-Americans surveyed supported vouchers, compared with 49 percent of all of those surveyed of any race. For African-Americans under age 35, however, the proportion approving of vouchers climbed to 75 percent. The center did not survey Hispanics.

"It's not like black parents or Hispanic parents have some philosophical preference for alternative types of education settings," said David A. Bositis, a senior political analyst for the center. "It's rather how satisfied they are with local public schools."

A generation gap seems to be emerging among African-Americans when it comes to opinions about school choice.

Older African-Americans are more pro-government and suspicious of the conservatives who back school choice, Mr. Bositis pointed out.

Mr. Jackson of the NAACP said the younger African-American generation did not grow up in a time when black people couldn't eat at certain restaurants because of their race and were barred in many states from attending public schools with whites.

"We need to link with our historical past to change the institutions," he said, rather than forsake the public system.

Less Committed?

While agreeing that the struggles of previous generations should be honored, some stress that the social landscape is different today.

African-American parents in their late 20s and early 30s are simply seeking the best education possible for their children, said Vernard T. Gant, the director of urban school services for the Association of Christian Schools International, a Colorado Springs, Colo.-based group representing 3,800 religious schools.

Younger blacks are less committed to institutions and systems, he said, which is why they often are more accepting of educational options outside the public schools.

Mr. Gant, who formerly ran private schools in Birmingham, Ala., noted that there is a history of black families sending their children to private schools. His mother, for example, sent Mr. Gant and his four brothers to a Lutheran school in Mobile until the family could afford to move to the suburbs and attend public schools there.

But in some quarters, if African-Americans don't see school choice through "the lenses of the past," said Mr. Fair of the Urban League in Miami, others in the community believe they have "sold out." Blacks who are receptive to school choice may be silenced and ostracized, he said, and meanwhile have no options for their children.

"There has been a paradigm shift, emotionally and psychologically," Mr. Fair said of the sentiment in favor of school choice. "We can't afford to

play around."

Impatient With Waiting

Most parents have been waiting patiently for better schools in their communities, but to no avail, Mr. Simmons of the Annenberg Institute said. Individual schools have achieved innovation and success, he said, yet "we're not creating communities of successful schools."

"Most people are unwilling to sacrifice their children to support their ideology," Mr. Simmons warned.

It is that impatience that has driven more African-Americans and Hispanics to view school choice as a way to improve their children's educational opportunities, many observers say.

'What I really want is for black folks to take the public schools back and not leave the public schools.'

Imani Bazzell, Parent Coordinator, African Americans for Accountability in Education

While there must be a multipronged approach to improving education, Ms. Quiñones of La Raza said, "some communities' needs are so great, parents aren't willing to wait."

But Mr. Jackson of the NAACP countered that parents must wait for education reform, especially in the absence of proven alternatives. Rather than support vouchers, the NAACP launched a national campaign last month that will work to end racial inequities in public schools, colleges, and universities.

In a related effort, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators last week announced legislative strategies to target the achievement gap between minority students and their white classmates.

And Shirley Igo, the president of the National PTA, cautioned that parents must ensure that exercising choice "doesn't negatively impact on the 90 percent of children in public schools."

That may be a difficult responsibility for parents to fulfill in some communities, such as the nation's capital, which has seen tremendous growth in charter school enrollment.

"I think the schools in D.C. are in such horrendous shape I could never begrudge a parent for trying to make the right decision for their child," said Peggy Cooper Cafritz, the president of the District of Columbia school board.

While she believes Washington's schools will improve, that will only happen if the community supports public schools, she said.

"We absolutely have an overarching duty to support public education, but I don't think it's just an African-American thing or a Jewish thing," Ms. Cafritz said. "Every single group has benefited from it. As a nation, we cannot splinter that commitment."

For some African-Americans, as urban districts struggle to reach their children, charter schools and vouchers are "in the meantime" solutions, said Imani Bazzell, a parent coordinator with African-Americans for

Accountability in Education, a community group in Champaign, Ill. Those who are disillusioned with public education, she said, often decide that they will create their own schools.

"But I'm real nervous about the bedfellows," Ms. Bazzell, the mother of three public school children, said, alluding to the political conservatives and corporate leaders who support school choice. "What I really want is for black folks to take the public schools back and not leave the public schools."

The Choice Challenge

Striking a precarious balance between providing parents with viable education alternatives while continuing to support a struggling school system consumes the Rev. Vanessa Oliver Ward.

Ms. Ward and her husband, the Rev. Daryl Ward, lead the Omega Baptist Church, one of the largest African-American churches in Dayton.

Three years ago, the church "adopted" a public elementary school, where members of the congregation volunteer their time as tutors and mentors. The church also ran an after-school program for students.

Then, last year, Ms. Ward helped open a charter school for middle school students, although the church membership favored starting a private religious elementary school. Currently, 150 students, including one of her children, attend the school, which is housed in the church. Her other children attend a private school.

'I could never begrudge a parent for trying to make the right decision for their child.'

Peggy Cooper Cafritz, President, District of Columbia School Board

Ms. Ward admitted that opening the Omega School of Excellence has been a "major challenge" because many of the church's 4,000 members are public school employees. The tension was palpable in the city as the district's enrollment decreased by about 4,700 children since 1996, and charter schools attracted more students, she said.

Still, the 19-year-old church's young congregation was willing to try something new.

While Ms. Ward is the charter school's director, her congregation continues to play a visible role in the school district. This fall, an Omega Baptist Church member was part of a slate of successful "reform-minded" candidates that was elected to Dayton's school board.

"We felt such urgency that we had to address the issue of our children not being educated," Ms. Ward said about starting the charter school. "We have to find a solution.

"But at the same time, you have to support the public school district."

Funding for this story was provided in part by the Ford Foundation, which helps underwrite coverage of the changing definition of public schooling.

On the Web

The Black Alliance for Education Options offers detailed discussions of the schooling options its supports. "These options," the organization writes, "enable parents to choose the best educational environment(s) for their children."

The Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation prints school choice testimonials from parents.

The Center for Education says that the data from its 2000-2001 nationwide survey of charter schools "reveals that charters are actually serving students who are largely underserved in the traditional public school environment: at-risk students, minority students, and low-income students." (The full report on the survey requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

Read an executive summary of the National School Board Association-sponsored survey on public attitudes toward school vouchers, conducted in May 2001. The survey found that "[57] percent of African American's oppose vouchers, including 41 percenter who 'strongly oppose' vouchers." (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.) Part of NSBA's Voucher Strategy Center.

PHOTOS: STRIKING A BALANCE: The Rev. Vanessa Oliver Ward of Omega Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio, greets students in the charter school housed at the church. While supportive of regular public schools, parents wanted more options.
—Jim Witmer for Education Week

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Basking in Personal Attention

Education Week

Kansas City, Mo.

Kiva Jefferson had her first parent-teacher conference before school started this year. That's because teachers at Lee A. Tolbert Academy Charter School, where her three daughters are enrolled here, visit their students' homes even before the opening bell.

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"I thought it was really neat that they wanted to meet the kids before school started," says Jefferson, who owns a hair salon. "That's never happened to me before at other public schools."

Explains Vivian Roper, a 30-year public school educator now in her third year as the principal of Tolbert Academy: "I'm trying to build a family before the school year starts."

Apparently, Jefferson and her partner, Eugene Pettiford, are not the only satisfied parents in Kansas City's charter schools. In the three years since charter schools were allowed here, 5,800 students—most of them African- American—have enrolled in the independent public schools.

Students in charter schools represent nearly 20 percent of the 34,000-student district's total enrollment, in fact.

Kiva Jefferson and Eugene Pettiford have found a warm and supportive environment for their daughters in a Kansas City, Mo., charter school.

Jefferson and Pettiford have no trouble ticking off the ways the school has convinced them that they made the right decision in not sending their girls to schools run by the Kansas City district.

For starters, they say, teachers at Tolbert Academy push their daughters academically, and don't hesitate to call home when they get into trouble. The hugs that the girls get each day as they leave school—as well as the fact that everyone at the school seems to know the family—are also comforting.

Just as important, the couple wants to be sure that their 6-year-old daughter, Rhea, who has albinism, is not teased. So far, she hasn't encountered such problems.

"I can actually tell people I like the school my children go to right now," Jefferson concludes.

Not everyone in this Missouri district is so eager to embrace charter schools. After all, each child enrolled in a charter school costs the city system about $5,700 in the per-pupil aid that follows the student.

The city's nine board members are split over charter schools, which were established under state law, despite their popularity. The board refuses to let charter operators lease any of the many vacant Kansas City school buildings.

"District schools can offer instructional programs that charter schools cannot offer. We try to stress that," says Cheri Median, the special assistant to Kansas City Superintendent Bernard Taylor Jr.

But the district's problems run deep, and parents like Kiva Jefferson and Eugene Pettiford know it.

In 1999, the Kansas City schools lost their state accreditation, based in part on low districtwide test scores and attendance rates. Many city schools are in great physical shape, however, thanks to a $2 billion infusion of construction money as part of a decades-old desegregation lawsuit.

"The district is trying to keep students in their schools ... but it doesn't make sense that our children have to go to school where there might not even have been accreditation," Jefferson says. "I don't understand that."

Jefferson moved here from Kansas City, Kan., two years ago and enrolled Kara, 11, in a local public school. The experience was not all bad. The principal was strict, and her teacher was pleasant, Jefferson says. Kara seemed to make progress.

But the mother also noted that the teacher seemed frustrated, and spent a lot of time disciplining other children. Meanwhile, Kara, a studious girl who stays out of trouble, seemed to get overlooked. "The bottom line was I felt she could be pushed more," Jefferson explains.

With a younger daughter moving into kindergarten and an older daughter moving in with her and Pettiford, Jefferson decided to take a chance on the upstart Tolbert Academy.

Jefferson, 30, who had one daughter and was pregnant with her second by the time she finished high school, says that she wants her daughters to take schooling more seriously than she did.

She admits she was nervous about sending her children to a school whose enrollment is almost entirely black, fearing that would mean low expectations and behavior problems.

But she was encouraged by Tolbert Academy's small class sizes—just 15 students—and the fact that other parents were willing to take a chance on the school, which operates out of a former Hebrew

'We're in a day and age when parents want choices.'

Vivian Roper,
Principal,
Lee A. Tolbert
Academy Charter
School

school and synagogue.

Pettiford, also 30, who recently started his own business buying and renovating rundown dwellings, is fond of the academy's focus on entrepreneurial skills.

The future for the charter school, which is finishing touches on a major renovation, looks bright. Roper, the principal, is not surprised by the school's success, though she concedes that test scores could be better. "We're in a day and age when parents want choices," she notes.

—Robert C. Johnston

PHOTOS: Reanna Jefferson, wearing No. 52 on her jersey, and her sister Kara, in No. 50, practice basketball at the Lee A. Tolbert Academy Charter School.
—Photos by Don Ipock for Education Week

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A Ticket Out of Public Schools

Education Week

San Antonio

Public schools worked well for Trinidad and Jacqueline Casas' two daughters. But when things started to go wrong for their 8-year-old son in a local public school, they wanted a change.

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The turning point came after the boy, John Eric Oranday, was in a classroom fight. When his parents asked where the teacher was during the incident, they discovered she had left the school to feed her baby, leaving her class under the supervision of the teacher in the room next door.

"I said to myself, 'My son should be removed. That should not happen,' " Jacqueline Casas recalls. The school honored her request to move John Eric to another class, but his grades plummeted.

With a limited income and no option for changing schools within the San Antonio school district, the Casas did what hundreds of families in this area have done: They turned to a local group that offers privately financed scholarships to help pay for private school.

With a limited income and no option for changing schools, the Casas turned to a local group that offers privately financed scholarships to help pay for private school.

The family qualified for a $110 monthly scholarship, but it fell $200 short of tuition at their first-choice school, the Christian Academy of San Antonio.

To raise the difference, Trinidad Casas, 46, began selling blood four times a month. His petite 36-year-old wife fainted when she tried; she ended up in a hospital, and gave up the idea of selling her blood.

Trinidad Casas says he'd rather work overtime to earn the rest of the tuition money, but he can't get enough hours at the hospital where he is a security guard.

He is not ideologically opposed to public schools and says that some day, if John Eric wants, he can attend public high school. For now, though, he says of the Christian Academy: "I just feel we need this kind of school, at least for our son. It's important."

Willing parents like Trinidad and Jacqueline Casas have helped make Bexar County, the expansive south Texas jurisdiction that includes San Antonio, a laboratory for school choice.

The groundwork was laid in 1992, when the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation of Bentonville, Ark., a clearinghouse for local private scholarship providers nationwide, opened CEO San Antonio.

Today, CEO San Antonio offers two grant programs. The one the Casases take part in gives partial-tuition scholarships to students from low- income families throughout the county. The second, better-known program offers full-tuition scholarships of up to $4,700 a year to students in the nearby city of Edgewood.

Today, more than 2,200 of the county's 250,000 students are using the scholarships to attend public or private schools of their choice.

"We want what's best for each individual child," says Teresa Treat, the program director for the CEO Foundation. "In the real world, all politics aside, we should focus on each child's individual needs."

Rolando Martinez, a spokesman for the 55,000-student San Antonio schools, says the district is not turning a blind eye on students who leave district schools.

In workshops and open houses, city schools are showing off the $500 million in construction projects the district has in the works. The district is also implementing a five-year plan to earn the state's highest accountability rating by 2005. "We must promote what we have and hope that families stay here or come back to the inner-city," Martinez says.

Mr. and Mrs. Casas say the grant allowed them to stay in San Antonio, where they grew up. Jacqueline Casas' father reached the 2nd grade and her mother finished 5th grade in Mexico before coming to Texas. Jacqueline dropped out in 11th grade to have her eldest daughter, Crystal, now a college freshman.

As for the Christian Academy of San Antonio, they found that by word of mouth.

"We were eating at a restaurant and asked a young waitress where she went to school," Jacqueline Casas recalls. "She said, 'CASA.' We asked her how she liked it, and she said, 'I love it.' "

The 2-year-old school is housed in a renovated former strip mall. The freshly painted and tidy site has 400 students; school leaders hope enrollment grows to 600. Yolanda Molina, the principal, says the academy hasn't needed to advertise.

Molina, who was a public school principal before taking over CASA, has no qualms about heading a private school where the controversial scholarships help pay students pay their tuition.

"I wanted to do the same [kind of work], but without the state restrictions, like mandates for testing," she says.

For starters, Molina wants the school to be personal. That's why teachers sit with their students and hold conversations during breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria.

The school also has a religious component that's not found in public schools. Parents are encouraged to attend a weekly chapel service with their children. Every student and parent also receives an award at the end of each grading quarter.

The Casas family feels welcome at the school. And, what's most important, they don't see the teasing that used to bother them so much.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm overprotective, but it's not that," Jacqueline Casas says. "Teasing and bullying damages kids. I see it happen. You hear about it in the news."

Amanda, John Eric's 11-year-old sister, says her brother has matured since he began attending CASA. "He's not as hyper, and his grades are up," she says. "He talks about God now. Sometimes, he even teaches me and my mom and my stepdad."

—Robert C. Johnston

PHOTOS: John Eric, 8, keeps an eye on his 3rd grade work in Sarah Borum's class at the Christian Academy of San Antonio. A private scholarship pays his tuition.
—Photos by Rick Kroninger for Education Week

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A Spiritual and Moral Foundation

Education Week

Milwaukee

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The value of an education was lost on Tonya Jordan until her children started school. When she was growing up in Milwaukee's inner city, she says, her parents didn't stress the importance of the classroom. Instead, the strict family edict for the six Jordan children was: "When you get 18, you had to get out of the house."

"All I did was live to turn 18," Jordan, now 35, says. "I graduated from high school and went to work."

While Jordan's friends went to college, she took a string of dead-end jobs and became the single mother of three children.

"I felt like a big dummy," she says candidly, sitting on the yellow-and-green sofa in her sparsely decorated Milwaukee home. "You get tired of being poverty- stricken. You get tired of the low-paying jobs. Finally, you think: 'Ding-dong, something is wrong.'

"You deprive yourself of life when you are not educated."

For Tonya Jordan, Milwaukee's voucher program has made the difference between having a choice for her girls and 'public school or nothing.'

It's those fundamental beliefs that drive Jordan to seek a better life for her three daughters. And it's that quest that led her to enroll her two eldest, Simone, 12, and Hanan, 10, in a private Muslim school last year using the Milwaukee voucher program. Her 3-year-old daughter, Abena, is in preschool.

More than 10,700 Milwaukee students use the publicly financed tuition vouchers to attend their families' choice of schools, including religious schools, while about 9,800 attend charter schools, which are public but operate independently.

The 103,400-student district is fighting back and experienced an upswing in enrollment of at least 1,200 students this year, after launching an aggressive marketing campaign highlighting public schools and their programs, says Don Hoffman, the acting director of community relations and public affairs.

"Now, we're finally telling our story," he says, adding that test scores were often the sole public image of the city's schools. "We have the best possible education available for young people in Milwaukee, and we're going to fight for kids."

But the district will have to work even harder to restore Jordan's confidence. Trying to make public schools work for her daughters, she became a school connoisseur of sorts, "shopping" for the best educational environments. She enrolled Hanan and Simone in the city's best public schools. Jordan herself is a 1984 graduate of Rufus King High School, which is a college-preparatory magnet school.

But for Jordan, overcrowded classes and what she believed were uncaring teachers and administrators prompted her to examine alternatives. Hanan briefly attended a charter school, for example.

"Public schools took me to my limit," says Jordan, who is Muslim.

She turned to Clara Mohammed School for both Hanan and Simone, seeking the spiritual and moral foundation of Islam along with multiplication tables and grammar.

The 30-year-old private Islamic school was one of the first African-American private schools in the city. Jordan and her siblings were once students there, but the tuition was too costly for the whole family and their parents enrolled them in public school.

Housed in a former leather factory and store on Martin Luther King Jr. Street, the K-9 school is part of a national school system founded by Clara Mohammed, the late wife of former Nation of Islam leader Elijah Mohammad. The school is in the midst of much-needed renovations. Half-finished classrooms are missing walls, and space heaters provide climate control.

Still, students seem comfortable in their small classrooms, learning how to write the Arabic alphabet or reading a passage from S.E. Hinton's *Rumble Fish*. Since 1997, word has spread about Clara Mohammed, and thanks to vouchers, the school's enrollment has nearly tripled, from 50 to 131 students. Most are not Muslim.

Clara Mohammed students must follow the laws of Islam. Girls must cover their heads with a *hijab* or scarf and wear tops that cover their hips. All students wear navy-and-white uniforms. Students pray every morning in Arabic and English.

"They think I'm punishing them," Jordan says, laughing, as Hanan nods her head in agreement. Taking a break from her math workbook, Hanan adds: "There's too much homework!"

Principal Basima R. Abdullah says vouchers and charter schools help parents like Jordan make more informed educational choices. "Parents are being more considerate of their children's needs," she says.

Without the 11-year-old Milwaukee voucher program, which pays $5,500 toward a child's private school tuition, Jordan couldn't afford to send the

girls to Clara Mohammed School.

"It was public school or nothing," says Jordan, referring the situation without vouchers. She now works as a reading assistant at the school, a job that pays less than $20,000 a year. The vouchers cover the entire tuition bill for both girls.

Jordan says she knows that as a poor, African-American single mother who has embraced vouchers, many people would use her for political gain. But Jordan, who has lobbied state legislators and marched in the capital with other parent advocates to keep the voucher program, says she has yet to spot any conspiracy.

"If [vouchers] were designed to take advantage of poor people, then it's turned on [the sponsors], because it's helping me," she argues unabashedly. "I'm going to use [vouchers] to get the best education I can give my children."

—Karla Scoon Reid

PHOTOS: Simone Jordan, 12, center, attends a morning assembly at Clara Mohammed School in Milwaukee, which she attends on a publicly funded voucher.
—Photos by Peter Zuzga for Education Week

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They met and fell in love in the hallways of Walnut Hills High School. They're proud Cincinnati public school graduates and boast about their alma mater's academic prowess.

Yet, when it came time to select a school for their children, they chose a small, private Episcopal school in Glendale, a suburb north of the city.

For Dwight and Melanie Moody, an African-American couple who are both 41, college-educated, and middle-class, the decision wasn't simple. No one in their immediate family had ever attended private school. Many, in fact, were graduates of Walnut Hills, a magnet school that is often considered among the nation's top public high schools.

And Melanie Moody, an assistant director of systems security for the Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble, points out, "We all had successful lives."

Dwight and Melody Moody flourished in public schools, but they chose to pay for private schools for their children.

Still, she adds: "You reach a point where you have to decide what's best for your particular child."

The Moodys—who have three children, ages 9, 6, and 2—have considered the consequences of opting for private schooling. Unlike families with limited resources, they acknowledge that they have the disposable income and the time to be involved at their children's school. Dwight Moody is a State Farm insurance agent and financial planner.

"If people like us don't support the public schools," Melanie Moody says, "they have no hope."

While the Moodys were happy with the public preschool program their daughter attended, they were worried about the long- term future of Cincinnati's schools. It took three attempts to pass an operating levy last year. Yet, on the first attempt, there was overwhelming support among city voters for a sales-tax increase to construct two new professional sports stadiums. The Moodys feared that a lack of support could decrease

the public schools' budget over the years.

But finding a private school where their children would be exposed to racial and ethnic diversity every day proved difficult.

"I want my daughter to see role models, like Mae Jemison, so she can have someone to look up to," says Dwight Moody of the doctor who was the first woman of color to travel to space.

That's why the family enrolled their daughter, Ryan, and later their son David, in Bethany School, which is part of an Episcopal convent. Part of the school's mission is to maintain a diverse campus. About 40 percent of the school's 262 students in kindergarten through 8th grade are children of color.

Dubbed the "Sound of Music" school by Dwight Moody, Bethany boasts a wooded, 20-acre site that it shares with the nuns who assist with the students' religious instruction. The 103-year-old former boarding school resembles a quaint college campus, with multiple buildings and class sizes that don't exceed 15. Tuition costs $5,950 annually.

Cheryl Pez, the head of the school, said Bethany accepts average and above-average students, often attracting children who are uncomfortable with their current schools or those seeking a greater academic challenge.

Pez says: "I feel like we've always been the right choice for some people."

Melanie Moody admits that it's easy for educated black families with well-paying jobs to opt out of public education. And, for some African-Americans, she says, that can be perceived as "selling out."

Still, the Moodys say they don't feel guilty. Bethany School is providing "the best opportunity for my children to grow and develop," Dwight Moody says.

At the same time, the two refuse to participate in what they call "public school bashing." Melanie Moody believes she needs to find another way to help the city's public schools, perhaps by mentoring.

And their children may attend public school one day. This past summer, they moved out of the city and are building a home in Wyoming, a community whose public schools are considered among the best in Ohio.

Ironically, the Moodys could end up paying to send their daughter to Walnut Hills High. Ryan, who is a blossoming artist, has her sights set on being a member of Walnut Hills' class of 2010.

"I don't know what I would do if I couldn't afford that kind of choice," Melanie Moody says.

Jan Leslie, the director of public affairs for the Cincinnati public schools, notes that the district has three of its own charter schools, Montessori schools, and has reorganized low-performing schools. But Cincinnati's enrollment has dropped from about 50,000 students in 1991 to 41,400 this year.

Melanie Moody worries about the long-term effects of alternatives like vouchers on the public school students who remain behind.

But she adds: "I think for a lot of people, the discussion about [school choice] and reality, when it applies to you, are very different."

—Karla Scoon Reid

PHOTOS: David Moody, who is the "student of the day," leads his kindergarten class in a lesson at Bethany School in suburban Cincinnati.
—Photos by Mike Simons for Education Week

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Washington

Public schools course through Virginia Walden-Ford's veins.

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As an African- American child growing up in Little Rock, Ark., at the height of the civil rights movement, she was the daughter of educators. Her father, William H. Fowler, was a principal and later an assistant superintendent of the city school district. Her mother, Marion Armstrong, was the first black teacher to work at an all-white elementary school there.

The famed Little Rock Nine were the first African-American students to integrate Central High School, in 1957. But Walden-Ford and her twin sister were among a group of about 130 black students who were handpicked to desegregate the city's high schools on a larger scale in the late 1960s.

As a teenager, Virginia Walden-Ford helped integrate public schools. But when her son got into trouble, she felt forced to leave them behind.

Now, at age 50, Walden-Ford is the executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, a nonprofit parent-information organization that helps parents find options outside the public system. She sent the youngest of her three children to private school. He then graduated from a District of Columbia charter school in 2000. Her two teenage stepsons also attend charter schools here.

The transformation from making civil rights history in public school hallways to becoming a school choice advocate was not easy for this strong-willed woman.

"I was not only raised in public schools, that was my father's life," says Walden-Ford. "We were committed to that."

Yet Walden-Ford came to a crossroads with her youngest child, William, that forced her to compromise. He was promoted annually despite his dismal grades, she says, but she was committed to "sticking it out" in the public schools.

"I felt guilty," she acknowledges with a hint of an Arkansas drawl.

By 9th grade, however, William started hanging out with hoodlums on

the verge of heading to prison. One night, Walden-Ford, by then a single mother, found him handcuffed to her front porch by the police. The only option that seemed available was "Southern school choice"—sending William to live with her parents in Little Rock.

A neighbor stepped in, though, helping to pay for the teenager to attend a local Roman Catholic school. William became a different person, his mother says.

As William was starting his senior year in 1999, the scholarship money ran out. It was two years after charter schools opened in Washington. Walden-Ford enrolled William in Booker T. Washington Public Charter School for Technical Arts, where he earned A's. After a year of community college, he enlisted in the U.S. Marines. The 19-year-old is a private first class stationed in Aberdeen, Md.

Without school choice, Walden-Ford believes, her son "would be in jail or dead. I couldn't control him."

More than 30 years after graduating from Central High, Walden-Ford now tries to reconcile her family's long-term commitment to public education with her passion for school choice.

Armstrong, Walden-Ford's mother, accused her daughter of deserting the public schools and wouldn't speak to her about school choice for years. Walden-Ford says her mother confronted her, arguing: " 'Your daddy fought hard for the public schools. How *dare* you leave?' "

Armstrong says there was "never any question" that her daughters would attend Central High School. Their father, who died in 1985, wanted his children to receive the best education possible. And, Armstrong says, he was monitoring the school's progress with integration.

"There was *no way* we would send our child to private schools," declares Armstrong, 79, now retired in Little Rock after teaching for 28 years. All five of her daughters graduated from public schools. "We just didn't believe in private schools."

That commitment was firm, despite the fact that every school day from 1966 until her graduation in 1969, Walden-Ford was the target of racial slurs. "I got called 'nigger' so much it would make your head spin," she recalls. "Not just the kids—the teachers, too."

Many African-Americans, she believes, are driven by the tradition of public schooling, rather than what's best for children today. Two of Walden-Ford's sisters, who used to teach in public schools, now work at charter schools in Detroit and Kansas City, Mo.

"We didn't fight to enroll our children into a bad public school," she asserts. "We fought for quality education."

Today, more than 10,800 of the District of Columbia's 68,000 students attend 37 charter schools. Peggy Cooper Cafritz, the school board president, believes charter schools should serve as an arm of districts for "kids who need something special," rather than as competitors.

Walden-Ford says she understands that the system needs time to make improvements. But, she argues, parents need alternatives in the interim—even if those options aren't flawless.

That's why Walden-Ford is dedicated to fielding 100 calls a week from parents desperate to find a better education for their children.

She scoffs at critics who label school choice supporters as fanatics.

"We're just a group of people living the horror of seeing a child not being educated," she said.

—Karla Scoon Reid

PHOTOS: Nigel Ford, Walden-Ford's stepson, attends the Sasha Bruce Charter School. Her son William graduated from a charter school in Washington last year.
—Allison Shelley/Education Week

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