

Institute for Independent Education

Good Morning to you, Chairperson Mason, and members of the Committee on Education and Libraries for the Council of the District of Columbia.

The Institute for Independent Education supports initiatives for public, private, and parochial school choice that help to empower parents to enroll their children in schools that reflect their individual needs and the values of their families.

The Institute is a non-profit tax exempt organization that promotes the growth and development of independent community-based schools located in inner cities and serve primarily African American and Hispanic/Latino American, Native American and Asian American children.

These schools often provide basic, as well as, advance academic programs, small classes, committed teachers, and a family-like context for learning. Often, these learning environments are created to affirm the culture and ethnic backgrounds of all students. There is usually very high involvement of parents, which provide extraordinary models for how parents can be triumphant in providing options in education for their children. Over 52,000 African American students are enrolled in independent community-based schools across the country. These students constitute the second largest group of African American students outside of the nation's public school systems.

Of the nearly 400 schools nationwide, that have been identified by the Institute, at least 20 to 30 of those schools are located in the Washington D. C. Metropolitan area.

The Institute for Independent Education, in its review of the BESST (Bringing, Educational Services To Students) proposal, examines some of the assumptions underlying the framework for systemic reform in maximizing student success.

The BESST plan calls for public/private partnership, but it gives priority to that component of the private sector that will provide direct infusion of top-down corporate management, rather than to give incentives that can empower parents to make choices. ✓

Parents must be given greater autonomy to make choices between public, private and independent schools.

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We believe that the proposed managerial initiatives are well-intentioned; however, these initiatives should help to complement existing educational infrastructures in the community, as represented by independent neighborhood schools.

The primacy of private corporate management in the BESST Plan for schools puts the priority for change again in bureaucratic structures, rather than the parent as a stakeholder. Such managerial initiatives alone may not address the severe challenges in our urban schools where a majority of children of color reside. Moreover, the attitude of many private sector investors is that they can come into neighborhoods and reinvent the wheel before giving themselves a chance to identify existing alternatives that can already be found in the community.

For over 10 years, the Institute for Independent Education has been documenting the existence of these community-driven institutions and the achievement of their students. The independent community-based school movement is fertile ground for examining public policies and should be supported as self-initiated efforts.

There should be a good faith effort in outreach to independent neighborhood schools as partners in the systemic reform proposal for the District of Columbia. The African American community, in particular, has been struggling against the odds for quality education for over 200 years. This movement for community-based schools has provided strategic options in education, where progress in the schooling of African American youngsters has been made.

The Institute believes that true parental choice should embrace independent community-based schools as partners. The recent study "System Reform in Washington D.C. Public Schools", conducted by the Institute discusses the public/private collaboration, which includes Washington D.C. public schools, independent community-based schools and corporate and business partnerships (IIE Research Report 1994).

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In a previous study "Tales of Two Cities", we reported that there were two very different academic worlds in the one political jurisdiction of the District of Columbia; two "cities" separated by family income. This neighborhood study examined schools by zip codes, which have boundaries that are more discrete than those of either city wards or school regions, and they also facilitate the analysis of demographic data. Our report revealed that while there were schools that had superior test performance data, only 20 per cent of all African American elementary students in this predominately African American city went to school in zip codes where schools were above the national norm. In fact, only 1 per cent of all African American elementary students went to school in the four zip codes where schools had the highest scores (IIE Research Report, 1989).

Since that data analysis, subsequent studies have continued to chronicle the lack of improvement in those statistics (IIE Report 1990 and 1994). These data support a clarion call to policymakers that there must be more variety in learning environments that support student success.

The basic premise of the BESST proposal appears to support more public/private partnerships in order to increase the number of schooling environments where substantial measurable learning can take place.

We believe that there is a glaring omission in the forthcoming proposal in the role of inner city independent community-based schools, where parents have been an active change agent for developing options in education.

We also believe that public policy advocates should invite the collaboration of these schools because they are entrepreneurial responses to a deep social need for change. Given the disparity between the academic worlds of students from low income neighborhoods and high income neighborhoods, there is a great opportunity to look at solutions that involve families who have taken the initiative to strengthen the existing infrastructures in their communities. Inclusion of these schools for choice could lead to exciting incentives for change and at the same time help to stabilize and revitalize the community.

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In summary, there are three major guiding principles that should undergird the framework for choice in the District of Columbia:

- 1) Any proposal for school choice must be developed in the early policy and planning stages to incorporate parental choice;
- 2) Parental choice proposals should give greater benefits to families with students with the most needs and that promote equity and freedom choice among public and private sectors;
- 3) The design of any systemic change must be flexible enough to respond to the diversity of existing schools, whether public or private;

The Institute for Independent Education is deeply concerned about the condition of education in the District of Columbia. The health of public schools have a profound effect on the health of the communities in which independent community-based schools must survive. We are truly interdependent on each other's success. Consequently, initiatives to open precollegiate education to the type of free market system that we already have in higher education, must include those coalitions, organizations and parents who have developed models that work. These models have been resilient to some of the most challenging circumstances found in inner city education.

We need the best options for our children early enough in their schooling career to make a real difference in their life choices. It makes little sense to save the "best option for later schooling" when only a few young people are left to take full advantage of them. We must liberate our children in diverse learning environments early to maximize the variety of skills, attitudes, talents and gifts found in our communities.

The success of independent community-based schools has a 200 year legacy. It would be ill-advised to ignore its impact on the well-being of our contemporary communities and their tremendous capacity to assist policymakers in developing a check and balance system for governance in inner city education.