

# Opening Pandora's Box

## Polly Williams' Doomed Partnership with the Education Privatization Movement

Polly Williams, the Wisconsin African American lawmaker behind the nation's first school voucher program, believed vouchers could help students of color in urban Milwaukee. Conservative donors and right-wing think tanks saw her program as opening the door to the privatization of public education. Education reform has come to mean different things to different people: from improving public education to privatizing it out of existence.



Young students in Philadelphia in 2011 demonstrate support for privatization programs. Image via Pennlive.com. Photo used with the permission of PA Media Group ©2011. All rights reserved.

**P**olly Williams, the “mother of school choice,” passed away on November 9, 2014. The moniker dates back to the late 1980s, when Williams broke ranks with her fellow African American and Democratic state legislators to partner with conservatives on Milwaukee’s school voucher program, the first of its kind in the nation. The Milwaukee voucher program was signed into law in 1990 by Republican Governor Tommy Thompson. A quarter-century later, conservative pro-privatization funders and advocates continue to advance their free-market agenda as if it is the salvation of the nation’s most underserved students. Vouchers, once stigma-

tized by their use in fighting integration of schools, are being marketed as the vehicle of a “New Civil Rights Movement.”

Polly Williams became an instant celebrity within the conservative-dominated world of school vouchers, although she did not share their privatization agenda. Williams supported a limited program targeting the city’s poorest families, sometimes referred to as “charity vouchers” or compensatory vouchers by her conservative allies. Those allies saw an opportunity to use urban students of color as a wedge to break down the alliances defending public education. They also viewed it as an opening that could be expanded over time to employ “universal vouchers”, or vouchers for students of

families in all income brackets, and ultimately the privatization of public education.

But by the late 1990s, Williams had been pushed aside, just as she feared that students of color from low-income families would be pushed aside by the diverging agenda of her White conservative partners. Within a few years, Williams was ridiculed by her former allies, described as “irrelevant” and no longer useful.

Nevertheless, upon her death, the school privatization leaders and organizations reclaimed her—memorializing her for her role as a pioneer while omitting her later disillusionment with the movement.

Williams' alienation from the movement she helped birth offers a cautionary tale for those who believe that vouchers, tuition tax credits for private schools—or even quasi-public charter schools—may offer a magic bullet to equitable education for underserved urban children.

### WHOSE INTERESTS ARE SERVED?

In 1995, Milton Friedman, an economist and the intellectual dean of the school privatization movement, stated, "Vouchers are not an end in themselves; they are a means to make a transition from a government to a market system." School privatization's "New Civil Rights" theme appears to be little more than a public relations campaign that camouflages this shift. Privatization advocates and their funders have appropriated the language of civil rights and use the dissatisfaction of underserved communities to promote the marketization of public education, an agenda that promises to leave many students of color behind.

Our nation has "consistently and purposely underserved students of color," notes Julian Vasquez Heilig, Professor of Educational Policy and Planning at University of Texas-Austin, in a 2013 *Texas Education Review* article on the current reframing of school choice as a civil rights issue. Heilig adds that the school choice movement depends heavily on African American and Latino leaders such as Williams. Janelle Scott, a professor in the graduate school of education and the African American Studies department at the University of California-Berkeley, writes in *Critical Studies in Education* about the tension between exposing the drivers of privatization while simultaneously understanding the limited options of underserved urban families:

In raising questions about the lack of commitment to eradicating structural inequalities by the managers of choice, I do not denigrate the choices individual parents of color are making for their children within the policy framework largely dictated by an elite invested in privatizing education. ...What is important is to illuminate the elite networks that are funding and paving the way for educational policy to be radically altered along business models.

The neoliberal privatization movement has presented "choice" as a civil rights effort—and as the only option for changing the status quo for these historically underserved students of color. It does so despite the preponderance of evidence that, as the authors of one educational study from 2002 wrote, "school choice, on average, does not produce the equity and social justice that proponents spin."

From the time of desegregation forward, disillusionment with integration and the failure to improve education in many urban communities led to the development of "independent black schools." These were neighborhood private schools owned and operated by African Americans, often run on shoestring budgets, and often featuring Afrocentric or multicultural curricula. In 1984, Dr. Joan Davis Ratteray founded the Institute for Independent Education to organize these schools, which numbered almost 300 by 1990 and were attended primarily by the children of Black middle-class parents.

Polly Williams sent her children to one of Milwaukee's independent, nonsectarian, Black private schools. Hoping to expand access for poor students whose parents could not afford the tuition, Williams advocated for a voucher program that would be limited to the lowest income families and to nonsectarian schools. She was, from the outset, concerned that raising income caps and including religious schools within voucher programs would again leave behind the poorest students.

Yet once Williams opened the door, the juggernaut of privatization began to roll through—a movement that blames teachers and teachers unions for low educational outcomes of students in underserved schools and fails to address (or even rejects) the role of structural inequalities in these same communities.

Ratteray was also a school choice supporter, and wrote a rousing op-ed in the *New York Times* supporting it. However, as the experiment in Milwaukee came to fruition, Ratteray grew wary of vouchers as an economic incentive. She described the existing independent Black schools as being the result of a social need, not a business venture. "If you put on it this idea that each kid will bring a certain

amount of money, it will change that," Ratteray warned. Her words proved prophetic.

### "SCHOOL CHOICE": ACADEMIC OPTIONS—OR OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFIT

The term "school choice" encompasses a broad range of programs, from charter schools to vouchers. The more accurate term, "private school choice," refers to programs that use public funding to pay or subsidize tuition for private school students. "Public school choice," meanwhile, includes a variety of programs that allow students to attend schools outside their assigned district, magnet schools, and charter schools, the single most rapidly expanding sector of choice. (Charters are technically public but are independently operated, sometimes by for-profit corporations, and are exempt from many state and local regulations. See related sidebar, "The Monetization of Charter Schools.")

In the category of "private school choice," there are now 41 programs in 19 states, plus Washington, DC, and state legislatures are continuing to introduce bills for new or expanded programs. Advocates claim there is great public demand, despite the fact that a 2013 Gallup poll indicated that opposition to the use of public funds for private schools is at 70%, its highest level ever recorded in that survey.

What's more, as documentation accumulates showing that vouchers have failed to improve education outcomes, privatization advocates increasingly point to the budget savings that these programs supposedly provide.

In addition to vouchers, the category of private school choice now includes tuition tax credit programs, a legislative maneuver that lets business redirect taxes owed to the state toward "scholarships" for student tuition at private and religious schools. These tax credit programs, sometimes referred to as "neovouchers" or back-door vouchers, have received less public scrutiny than vouchers, even as they currently comprise the largest private school choice programs in numbers of students. (See related sidebar on tax credit programs.)

## SCHOOL CHOICE'S SEGREGATIONIST ROOTS

Before African American and Latino children became the focus of a multi-million dollar, pro-privatization public relations campaign, vouchers had a distinctly racist heritage. As author Kevin Kruse explains in *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, vouchers were part of a deliberate strategy in the 1950s and 1960s to circumvent school desegregation: "In the event of court-ordered desegregation, school buildings would be closed, and students would receive grants to attend private, segregated schools."

"Massive Resistance" was the name adopted by the united effort of White leaders and politicians to prevent desegregation. "Freedom-of-choice" plans were used in several states to perpetuate segregation, as they allowed students to "choose" their school while, in effect, retaining segregated Black and White schools.

Some locations followed through with their threats to close public schools. Prince Edward County, in Virginia, closed down its entire public school system from 1959 to 1964. Prince Edward only reopened integrated schools following the Supreme Court's 1964

ruling in *Griffin v. School Bd. of Prince Edward County* that Virginia's tuition grants for sending white students to private schools were unconstitutional.

The privatization agenda was birthed by segregationists in the 1950s, but it was kept alive in subsequent decades by Milton Friedman and sustained by wealthy conservative donors (and the infrastructure built with their dollars). School privatization became a key part of the

"devolution" of government, advocated by conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, Cato Institute, Heartland Institute, and the 50-state network of self-described "free market" think tanks coordinated through the State Policy Network. The names of the major funders of school choice, including the Bradley Founda-

## POLLY WILLIAMS' "UNHOLY ALLIANCE"

Annette "Polly" Williams was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1980 and served until 2010. She also ran the 1984 and 1988 Wisconsin statewide campaigns for Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential bid. In the late 1980s, despite intense objections from her fellow Democratic legislators and organizations such as the NAACP, Williams joined forces with conservatives to push through the nation's first voucher program.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, activists and legislators proposed a variety of programs to provide public funding to Milwaukee's independent Black private schools, some of which were in serious financial jeopardy. Activists in the effort were largely liberal until the 1980s and 1990s, when conservatives and religious leaders began to capitalize on the idea as a model that could open the door to a larger voucher program.

In addition to her Republican allies in the state legislature, Williams' partnerships with

conservatives included the Bradley Foundation and its director Michael Joyce; former GOP Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, a champion of conservative welfare reform; and George and Susan Mitchell, Wisconsin's leading pro-voucher advocates. (Williams described these partnerships as an "unholy alliance" in an interview with the Heartland Institute, an interview in which she was also described as the "Rosa Parks of vouchers.")

**Williams became the public face of the pro-voucher movement, speaking at such conservative bastions as the Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institute, and the California State Republican Convention. Yet as Williams went public with her concerns about the raising of income caps and universal vouchers, the conservative backlash mounted.**



*Polly Williams speaks about vouchers and school choice programs in Wisconsin in 1998. Photo courtesy of Meg Jones and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.*

tion and the DeVos and Walton families, should automatically raise red flags for progressives.

"In retrospect, it seems strange that so many liberals bought into an idea that emanated from conservative think tanks and conservative thinkers," education scholar and anti-privatization activist Diane Ravitch wrote.

In 1988, Gov. Thompson vetoed legislation to increase funding for the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and provide additional teachers to reduce class size—but he included a voucher program proposal in his state budget. The Bradley Foundation provided research, polls, publications, and a legal defense of the voucher program.

In an effort to make the plan more palatable to Wisconsin legislators, Thompson reduced the scope of his statewide voucher plan for 1989 to include only non-sectarian schools in Milwaukee County. Thompson assured voucher advocates that once the bill passed, the program could be expanded.

Polly Williams rejected Thompson's plan, but she introduced a bill that would pass and be signed into law in April 1990: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). (Thompson even held a symbolic re-enactment of the signing in one of Milwaukee's independent Black community schools.)

Virtually overnight, Williams became the public face of the pro-voucher movement, accepting speaking engagements at such conservative bastions as the Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institute, and the California State Republican Convention. Williams also gave high-profile interviews, including one on *60 Minutes* and one with Rep. Newt Gingrich's GOPAC, aired on the Christian Broadcast Network.

In his book *Freedom of Choice: Vouchers in Education*, author Jim Carl noted that there was a moment when it seemed that conservatives and liberals might converge in agreement on the concept of compensatory vouchers. Carl described it as a program “with attributes originally championed by left-liberal policy makers, free-school advocates, and community activists from the 1960s.” But, as Carl points out, “social conservatives did not want to stop at nonsectarian, compensatory vouchers.”

Likewise, it would not be long before the agenda of Polly Williams and that of her conservative allies would diverge.

## THE ALIENATION OF POLLY WILLIAMS

Of all the partners in the “unholy alliance,” Michael Joyce and the Bradley Foundation were among the most unlike-

ly allies for the African American community. The Bradley Foundation had been a longtime funder of author Charles Murray, including his book *The Bell Curve* and its discredited theory of Black intellectual inferiority. Since its founding in 1985, the Bradley Foundation has been at the epicenter of reactionary policies, including welfare reform, opposition to affirmative action, and claims that “moral poverty,” rather than structural inequity, is the source of social ills in poor urban communities. The Bradley Foundation has also provided millions to the Heritage Foundation, Heartland Institute, Free Congress Foundation, and other conservative think tanks.

In 1992, the Bradley Foundation partnered with Parents Advancing Values in Education (PAVE), a nondenominational organization founded from the dissolution of the Milwaukee Diocesan Education Foundation. Funded by Bradley and several Wisconsin businesses, the program provided vouchers for students, including those attending religious schools, and was designed to expand and “ratchet support for the publicly funded program.” To garner Protestant and Jewish support, the new program was not limited to Catholics. In 1995, Gov. Thompson followed through with his plans to gradually extend the program, and by the 1998-99 school year, 70% of the students in the MPCP program attended religious schools.

Williams was also concerned about the raising of income caps for the voucher program, as this gradually shifted funding toward families who were already sending their children to private schools. She objected to universal vouchers, stating, “Eventually, low-income families would be weeded out due to the large volume of families wanting to participate.”

In a 2002 interview, Williams explained the parameters under which she supported vouchers and which, by that time, had led to rifts with her former allies. Ironically, the interview was with George Clowes, senior fellow at Heartland Institute addressing education policy. Clowes later wrote a report for Heartland responding to the lack of improvement in educational outcomes in the Milwaukee voucher program and disillusionment of some school reformers. Referencing Milton Friedman, Clowes

called for a shift from “charity vouchers” for needy students to universal vouchers.

Journalist Bruce Murphy, who published a 2001 article about Williams and her growing disillusionment with Milwaukee's program, wrote that Williams understood school choice as an experiment. “Our intent was never to destroy the public schools,” Williams told Murphy. Murphy, himself a former teacher and principal at one of Milwaukee's independent Black private schools, describes the conservative strategy as a “two-fer”—an agenda to eliminate teachers' unions and build the myth of school privatization as a cheaper education alternative.

As Williams went public with her complaints, the conservative backlash mounted. From 1990 to 1997, Williams received speaking honorariums and expenses totaling \$163,000, more than any other Wisconsin legislator. By 2000, this figure had dropped to just \$400.

In 1998, Williams gave a frank interview for a chapter in *The Politics of School Choice*, co-written by a professor at Regent University. Williams expressed her concern that school choice was becoming a program for middle-class Whites who did not need public assistance:

The whites that promote Reverend Floyd Flake (school choice advocate in Jamaica, Queens, New York) are out to replace public education for their own children, not for blacks. I have a black agenda for black parents.

Joyce, of the Bradley Foundation, had formerly claimed that “the Lord God” had led him to support Williams, but, by 2001 he was accusing her of being a racist bigot. Joyce claimed that Williams had told him she didn't much like White folks, and that she kept referring to school choice as “a Catholic movement.” Joyce added, “She was poised to be and could have been the leader of school choice. But she stepped aside and Fuller became the leader.”

Fuller is Dr. Howard Fuller, who replaced Polly Williams as the African American standard-bearer for the movement. Fuller and Williams attended the same high school, and later shared concern about the future of underserved children in Milwaukee as well as their opposition to universal vouchers.

## What Are Tuition Tax Credit Programs?

Tuition tax credit programs, sometimes called neovouchers, are “private school choice” programs.<sup>1</sup> Individuals or corporations receive credit against their state taxes for funding “scholarships” used to pay private school tuition (or to attend a public school outside the student’s district). The largest corporate tax credit program in dollars and in numbers of students is in Florida, where companies can receive a 100% credit against their state taxes for the amount given to the nonprofits, which distribute the tuition funds.

Businesses are often lauded in local papers for their “donations,” but these contributions cost the company nothing in states with a 100% credit, and very little or nothing in states like Pennsylvania, where a company is credited 75% for a one-year and 90% for a two-year contribution (plus federal deduction). Claims of tax savings for states have largely been based on one 2008 Florida report in which key figures affecting the calculation were admitted to be guesses by the authoring agency.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the 14 states with tax credit programs do not require the participating schools to administer standardized tests or adhere to requirements on curriculum and teacher qualifications. The majority of these students attend religious schools (currently 81.5% in Florida). While many of these schools are excellent, a significant percentage use Christian fundamentalist curricula, (such as A Beka, Bob Jones University Press and other textbooks) that promote Young Earth creationism, hostility toward other religions, and revisionist history.

## Monetizing Charter Schools

Charter schools are technically a “public school choice,” but operated by an outside group that is not bound some of the same local and state regulations as traditional public schools.<sup>1</sup> Today charter schools are the fastest growing sector of school choice, with more than two million students attending over 6,000 charter schools.

Charters were originally intended to foster innovative approaches to teaching in small, autonomous schools. Excellent charter schools exist; overall, however, charters have failed to outperform traditional public schools. According to a recent study, Pennsylvania charter schools covered less material in both math and reading than did traditional public schools (the equivalent of 29 days of reading and 50 days of math).<sup>2</sup>

Charter schools have become a primary vehicle for the monetization of education. Although most states require charters to be run by nonprofit organizations, many contract out the management of charters to for-profit companies, sometimes with little separation between the charter board and the for-profit management.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, the buildings and facilities are purchased by the for-profit arm and leased back to the nonprofit, or even resold by the for-profit to an investment company.<sup>4</sup> Entertainment Properties, Inc., a publicly traded real estate investment trust (REIT), now owns the buildings and/or facilities of 60 charter schools.<sup>5</sup> According to an Ohio investigation, 40 percent of that state’s charter schools pay lease to a for-profit entity or out-of-state landlord. Rising lease costs are taking increasingly large percentages of the schools’ budgets, with one school paying more than 80 percent of its total budget in lease to a for-profit entity.<sup>6</sup>

Fuller is a former superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools with a previous history as a Black nationalist. In 1969, using the name Owusu Sadukai, Fuller initiated Malcolm X Liberation University “as a way of providing Black students with a revolutionary alternative to mainstream Black colleges.”

In 1995, Fuller became the director of the Bradley Foundation-funded Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University and founded the Black Alliance for Educational Options, also heavily funded by Bradley and by Walmart heir John Walton. Fuller continues today to serve as a major spokesperson for school choice and is currently on several boards, including the Milwaukee Region Teach for America.

Meanwhile, by 2006, Williams had shifted her efforts to supporting her city’s public school system. She formed the African American Education Council and worked with Milwaukee’s teachers’ union, the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA), and Milwaukee’s School Board of Directors to develop a strategic plan for improving MPS.

Following the election of Republican Gov. Scott Walker in 2010 and his efforts to dramatically expand the voucher program, Williams again vocally objected. “They have hijacked the program,” Williams said in 2013. George Mitchell, a major pro-voucher donor, immediately responded, describing Williams as “irrelevant” and saying he had had no dealings with Williams after about 1994 or 1995. “Polly was useful to the school choice movement because of her race and party affiliation,” Mitchell told a reporter.

Although Williams was discarded by her allies, her name and face were still used throughout conservative media as an African American Democratic supporter of school vouchers. Sean Hannity lauded her in his 2004 book *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism*. In 2013, Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform included Williams on a list of “venerable Davids against the Goliaths of education.”

Following her death in November 2014, Polly Williams was memorialized as the “mother of school choice.” In a post on the American Federation for Children (AFC) website, Chairman Betsy

DeVos described Williams' legacy as living on in the lives of "hundreds of thousands of children across the country who benefit from school choice." That post, along with most media coverage of Williams' death, omitted any mention of her later disillusionment with voucher programs.

## THE BAD NEWS ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

The school privatization movement has brought together an odd array of political bedfellows. Some are drawn by the prospects of profiting from the conversion of education into a multi-billion dollar industry. Others are ideologues, opposed to public education on either libertarian or religious grounds. Yet another group is comprised of religious leaders, perhaps not ideologically opposed to public education but anxious to use vouchers or neovouchers to fill the desks of their own schools. Ironically, in some districts, charter schools (see related sidebar) have even drawn students away from private religious schools.

Recently, more religious leaders have promoted privatization programs as a way to save religious schools with dwindling enrollment. The 2011 conference of the National Leadership Roundtable of Church Management, a Catholic organization, called for an aggressive strategy to implement tuition tax credit programs or neovouchers in all 50 states. Speaker B. J. Cassin, founder of Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation, told the audience, "Think of the effect if all Catholic schools, not just the ones that we mentioned here, had the ability to have this kind of revenue come in [from tax-credits]; it changes the environment completely." Like many other promoters of privatization, Cassin frames his agenda as altruism: "We have a social justice issue that we are presenting, and part of that is to eliminate the discrimination of the inner city kids."

In Florida and Pennsylvania, the two states with the largest private school choice programs (both are corporate tax credit programs or neovouchers), many of the students who receive neovoucher money attend fundamentalist Christian, conservative evangelical, or nondenominational schools. Both Florida and Penn-

sylvania tout their tax credit programs as providing an opportunity for minority students to access a better education.

But instead of the Afro-centric curricula supported by Williams and Fuller, the A Beka and Bob Jones University curricula used in many of these schools are written with little regard for the heritage of children of color. Their textbooks promote nonfactual and revisionist history as well as Young Earth creationism and climate change denial.

Most vouchers and neovouchers fund students attending schools with no curricula requirements or public accountability. Georgia's tax credit program, which allows for donations from both individuals and corporations, makes it a criminal offense to track how that money is spent. Georgia's program also promised to designate scholarships for students in "failing public schools" from low socioeconomic levels, but as a 2013 *New York Times* article exposed, the program has "[benefited] private schools at the expense of needy children." In Georgia and elsewhere, these programs are showing signs of re-segregating students by both race and income. Many of the students subsidized by these programs were already enrolled in private schools.

Michael W. Apple, a professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, says that universal vouchers, or voucher programs for which all income levels are eligible, expose the privatization movement's hidden agenda. "They want to minimize public schools and eventually eliminate as many government services, public employees and public institutions as possible," writes Apple. In *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality*, Apple argues that "placing schools in a market does not interrupt the stratification of education, except for a very limited group of students. Instead, as study after study has shown, existing hierarchies are simply recreated."

International examples include Chile, where vouchers were part of the reforms initiated during the rule of Augusto Pinochet and with the assistance of the "Chicago Boys," economists trained under Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. Research on Chile's program indicates that vouchers failed to produce improved average educational outcomes,

but exacerbated stratification and inequality.

Although excellent private schools exist, multiple studies have dispelled the myth that private schools academically outperform public schools on average. A 2006 study not only "challenged assumption of private school superiority overall" but also found substantial differences among various kinds of private schools. The poorest performers were conservative Christian schools.

## THE EMPTY "NEW CIVIL RIGHTS" BRAND

In his 2003 book *Voucher Wars*, attorney Clint Bolick recounts how he anticipated legal challenges to the Milwaukee voucher program and contacted Polly Williams to offer legal representation. Bolick describes Bradley Foundation president Michael Joyce as having been wary of Williams but understanding the "necessity of their temporary alliance"; he describes Joyce as pursuing school choice "as 'a silver bullet' issue: the type of program that could destroy a key pillar of the welfare state."

Bolick was known for his work against race-based affirmative action. However, as the need grew for legal defense of emerging school choice programs, Bolick turned his attention to it and co-founded the libertarian, public interest law firm Institute for Justice in 1991 with seed money from David and Charles Koch.

Branding education privatization as a civil rights effort has been a deliberate strategy. In his book, Bolick describes how he helped orchestrate the mainstream media's first use of civil rights language in defense of school choice while discrediting a voucher opponent as "blocking the schoolhouse door to minority children." In 2002, Dick DeVos addressed the Heritage Foundation, emphasizing the need for his audience (wealthy, white conservative donors and activists) to remain behind the scenes and have other faces as the public advocates of school choice.

As a 2001 *Economist* article spelled out, the strategy of linking the privatization movement to the wishes and activism of "poor blacks, not rich whites" has helped disguise the people actually behind these campaigns.

Another primary goal of the privatization movement is to drive a wedge between two pillars of the Democratic Party: African American voters and teachers unions. The same *Economist* article, “Blacks v. Teachers,” touted this growing wedge. While the article may have been premature in celebrating the success of both vouchers and charter schools, efforts to drive a wedge between Black voters and the teachers’ unions have been remarkably successful.

At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, for example, a pre-convention event for the Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) essentially became an hour-long attack on teachers’ unions. At the DNC in 2012, Convention Chairman Antonio Villaraigosa, Newark Mayor Cory Booker (now a U.S. Senator), and Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson (and husband of Michelle Rhee), headlined a screening of the fictional movie *Won’t Back Down*, which promotes parent trigger bills, a mechanism for replacing unionized public schools with non-union charters. A model bill for the “Parent Trigger Act” and much of school choice and privatization legislation is designed and promoted by the American Legislative Exchange Council or ALEC, which coordinates with the State Policy Network and has become notorious for promoting “stand your ground” legislation and propagating climate change denial.

### CURRENT TRENDS

Despite its failure to improve educational outcomes, Wisconsin’s voucher program is now 25 years old and continues to grow. Today, the program includes about 30,000 students and represents the second largest de facto school district in the state.

Characterized by instability and lack of accountability, Milwaukee’s voucher program has resulted in numerous stories like one last year in a local paper about a

minister and his wife who accepted \$2.3 million in taxpayer funding only to close their Lifeskills Academy abruptly during the school year. Although their house in Wisconsin was foreclosed, the couple moved to a gated community in Florida, where they opened another school. Available test results showed that in the

**Private school choice and public charters continue to masquerade as the best option for underserved children. As Julian Vasquez Heilig warns, “If you are a ‘choice’ proponent interested in civil rights—understand that in markets there are winners and losers. In the case of choice, the long-term losers in a large-scale market-oriented education continue to be historically underserved students of color and special populations.”**

2011-2012 school year, only one student in their Lifeskills Academy tested proficient for grade level in reading, and none in math.

Polly Williams bemoaned the co-opting of her voucher vision by national conservative figures, including Grover Norquist, William Bennett, and Lamar Alexander (who was Secretary of Education from 1991-1993). Now a U.S. Senator, Lamar Alexander is poised to take the helm of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). In early 2014, Alexander introduced a bill in the Senate that would redirect \$24 billion of federal education funding and incentivize states to use the money to fund 11 million school vouchers for students in poverty. These could be used for private schools or even homeschooling. On her website, Ravitch wrote simply: “Bottom line: the Alexander plan will destroy public education in the U.S.”

In the same post, Ravitch quotes a Pennsylvania Republican who warns that Alexander’s package only includes \$2,100 dollars per voucher, meaning that the “school district of record” must provide the rest of the tuition. Ravitch continues, “Do not be fooled: this is not a conservative plan. This is a radical plan. It will send public dollars to backwoods churches and ambitious entrepreneurs.”

The marketing of both private school choice and public charters promises to escalate over the next two years, masquerading as the best option for underserved children. This continues even as traditional public schools are stripped of funding, teachers, art and music programs, libraries, and more. In *Reframing the Refrain: Choice as a Civil Rights Issue*, Julian Vasquez Heilig

closes with a warning about where we may be headed:

So if you are a “choice” proponent interested in civil rights—understand that in markets there are winners and losers. In the case of choice, the long-term losers in a large-scale market-oriented educa-

tion continue to be historically underserved students of color and special populations.

Heilig continues, “Moving our schools from the public sector to the private sector is a false choice.”

The story of Polly Williams serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of partnering with school choice donors, politicians, and think tanks. Those concerned about the future of public education should not be fooled: the agenda of these players is about privatization and market-based reform. Williams continues to be used as the face of a movement that never intended to fulfill her personal vision. But once she opened the door for her right-wing allies, it could not be closed.

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## Polly Williams:

- Williams' program is described as the first voucher program in the nation, but it was preceded by programs used by states to fight desegregation. In 1964, the Supreme Court found county and local tuition grants and tax credits used to fund White students in private schools to be unconstitutional.
- The program that passed was added to the Budget Amendment Bill by Democratic Senator Gary George, but drawn from previous bills authored by Polly Williams. Pro- and anti-voucher activists and education scholars credit Williams. See John F. Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of America's First Voucher Program* (Princeton University Press, 2000).
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