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## **School Choice: Seeing the Forest for the Trees**

*by Congressman John Sullivan*

Many people lose sight of the big picture when it comes to the issue of educating our Nation's children. Some just can't see the forest for the trees.

Most public schools do a great job. Teaching is truly a heroic profession and I applaud those selfless public servants who perform everyday under enormous pressure and with limited resources. But too many children are trapped in schools where failure is the norm and the culture is one of despair and hopelessness.

Educating our children is too important an undertaking to compromise at the expense of high standards and accountability. Too many of America's students are trapped in schools that consistently fail to meet the minimum standards. Having choices and options is considered advantageous in every aspect of our lives except with the most fundamental building block to success in America – education.

Just as the federal government provides Pell Grants and GI Bill loans to college students for use at the university of the student's choice – public or private, including religious schools – parents should have similar choices for their elementary and secondary school children. Why shouldn't the federal government provide K-12 students with the same kind of educational options we provide other students? What good is a college loan if a student doesn't have the quality educational foundation that K-12 provides? All students should have access to a quality education of their own choosing; despite where they live or what school district they happen to be in.

Local control and innovation needs to be implemented if students in failing schools are to have opportunities to succeed. For instance, Washington, D.C. schools are considered among the most troubled in the Nation. Crime, drug abuse, and lack of discipline have crippled the educational opportunities in those schools. In the District of Columbia, two-thirds of fourth graders have “below basic” reading ability despite the second-highest per-pupil expenditure in the country -- \$9,650 per student -- as well as teachers who are paid among the highest in the Nation. We should fund education but instead of throwing money at the problem, we should focus on keeping schools accountable, asking hard questions, and looking for solid results.

It's clear the schools in our Nation's Capital are in a crisis. Emboldened by *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld Cleveland's school choice program, Washington, D.C.'s Democrat Mayor Anthony Williams has led parents in actively pursuing more choice in their children's education. Mayor Williams and other brave local leaders in Washington understand that parents should control the educational destiny of their children – not bureaucrats.

Why shouldn't parents have choices and alternatives in how their children are educated? Why should students be left behind in schools that cannot, or will not, meet minimum standards?

This problem is also an economic one. When students receive a quality education and enter the workforce with the skills necessary to compete and succeed, we all benefit from a stronger workforce and a strengthened economy. The link between illiteracy and crime also cannot be ignored. There are libraries of statistics that describe to the ongoing link between crime and poor education. It doesn't take an expert to understand that the best way to prevent crime in the long-term is to provide access to opportunity through education.

Ask any teacher and they'll tell you -- all children can learn. But when you lower the bar, you get low results. If we raise the bar for students and are forward-thinking in how we approach accountability, we'll make real strides in education. It's not only the right thing to do; it makes sense economically for every one of us. In order to make real changes, we must discard the old models and out-dated ideas about how schools should educate students. We have to be able to trust parents – not bureaucrats – to do what's best for their child's education and their future. All of America's students should have the opportunity to learn, despite their circumstances or the failure of their schools to meet minimum standards in education. We can't afford to condemn any child to mediocrity.

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