

**GIVING CHILDREN A CHANCE TO LEARN: THE
D.C. STUDENT OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP ACT**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF
GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, RESTRUCTURING,
AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED FIFTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

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**GIVING CHILDREN A CHANCE TO LEARN: THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA STUDENT OPPOR-
TUNITY SCHOLARSHIP ACT**

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 1998

U.S. SENATE,
OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, RESTRUCTURING,
AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SUBCOMMITTEE,
OF THE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:40 a.m., in room SD-342, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon Sam Brownback, Chairman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senator Brownback.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BROWNBAC

Senator BROWNBAC. I will go ahead and call the Committee meeting to order, and if our two witnesses would like to come up to the table, I have a brief opening statement and then we are going to have a good discussion about an important topic. I appreciate your willingness to join us today.

I want to welcome everybody here, the hearing is going to be an informal session looking at the issue of D.C. vouchers. The President now has on his desk, or soon will have on his desk, a bill allowing certain students within the District of Columbia that qualify to have a voucher that they could take to any public or private school. This is if they qualify, if they are at 180 percent of poverty or below. This has passed both the House and the Senate, a majority in both bodies believing strongly that we need to do something to allow children some choice and some opportunities.

We have held hearing after hearing, frankly, in this Committee meeting room about the failures of the D.C. public school system. We most recently had one in here where we were looking at the Stanford 9 test results, and in some high schools in the District of Columbia we have whole classes that nobody has scored at or above competency for that grade level on a nationwide basis. Everybody was below competency level, and it is just a crying shame that students didn't have the opportunities in the system.

We see in test score results, as well, that when students start out in the District of Columbia public school system, they start out on about a national par, average with everybody else. And then the longer they are in the system, the worse they do. They just continue to decline. So it is not that you are starting off with a group of students that aren't capable of performing. They are very able

to perform, and yet this system has failed them. That is why we want to see some alternatives choice to this system.

I certainly give my best to the new superintendent, Mr. Ackerman, and wish her godspeed on getting the system changed, but I don't think we can wait around until the year 2000 and hope and pray that we get the changes we need. I think we need to be able to offer those to the students now.

I found it interesting that the Washington Scholarship Program, which is a private-funded scholarship program for low-income students—in their first application pool, they received 7,500 applicants for 1,000 scholarships that were available. And so at least 6,500 students are going to be receiving rejection notices saying that they can't go to a school other than the public school system because they can't afford it and they can't get this scholarship.

We are simply asking for \$7 million in the budget, that the President approved, and allow students to do what he did with his daughter, Chelsea, which is to send them, if they want, to a private school.

Something else I would note to the members on the panel and the people in the audience is that we have now surveyed every office in the Congress as far as Members of Congress, Members of the Senate, even delegates that don't have voting privileges, the President and the Vice President. And do you know how many Members we found sending their children to the District of Columbia public school system? Zero. Not a single one sends their children to the District of Columbia public schools.

Now, what are they saying by this? And then the President would deny the opportunity to those who are less fortunate financially to send their children to better schools? Everybody, every parent, wants the best for their child, and then we are saying, or the President is saying that they can not. I hope he changes his mind and does sign this, providing to the children of D.C. the same thing that he provided to his child, a quality education and an opportunity and a choice that he had.

I hope that he is going to be willing to let students in the District of Columbia do something similarly. The President will have this option.

[The prepared statement of Senator Brownback follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SENATOR BROWNBACK

I wanted to call this brief hearing to solicit the views of the folks who will be directly impacted by the President's decision to sign or veto the bill we are discussing today. I especially want to welcome our D.C. parents who have agreed to be here with us in order to explain how school choice impacts the lives of their children.

Last Thursday, the House passed the "D.C. Student Opportunity Scholarship Act," which was passed in the Senate last year. The bill will be sent to the White House this week and I call on the President to sign this legislation. He must not allow any more D.C. children to fall victim to the poor state of D.C. public schools. The President must sign this legislation.

As Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring and the District of Columbia, one of my highest priorities is to ensure that the children of this city get the education they need and deserve. This Subcommittee's last hearing entitled "Lessons Learned in the D.C. Public Schools" did just that; it taught us just how grim the D.C. public schools scored on national standardized tests and how long it would take to mend the system that fails these children every day.

At that hearing, the then Chief Executive Officer and Superintendent of the District of Columbia Public Schools, General Julius Becton, and his successor, Ms. Arlene Ackerman, testified that the school system would be back on track by the year 2000 and that by then the children of D.C. would be scoring on par with the rest of the Nation.

I support the effort Ms. Ackerman is making and can appreciate all the hard work that lies ahead of her. I cannot, however, in good conscience sit back and allow our students to linger in broken schools while quality education is available at private and parochial schools, as well as, after school tutoring programs.

In 2 years, a first grader will learn to read, write, add and subtract. In those same years, our high school students gain the skills and preparation they need for college or a job. Two years is too long to wait while students are left neglected in a system that admits it is not educating its students sufficiently.

The statistics show that D.C. kindergarten and first grade students start out like other children across the country at median achievement levels; however, the statistics also show that those students are not likely to remain at those academic achievement levels. What kind of message is that sending our children? What kind of incentive is that to stay in school?

While Ms. Ackerman works to reform the school system, we must reach out to those students who are presently enrolled. These children are cheated each year they spend in D.C. public schools and they need and deserve the opportunities that this bill will offer.

We are here today with the hopes of providing the District's children the chance to learn with the "D.C. Student Opportunity Scholarship Act." The bill will provide approximately \$7 million, in addition to the District's Public Education budget, to be apportioned into 1,800 scholarships for low-income families in the city. The bill allows these low-income parents to choose between public and private schools in the Washington Metropolitan Area.

This legislation would simply give children and their parents the ability to choose the quality education each child needs. Under this bill the child's educational needs are placed above the school system's need to improve. Again, I call on the President to give the children of D.C. a chance by signing this important legislation.

Senator BROWBACK. I wanted to hear from a couple of people that are dealing with this in their own lives. Our panel today consists of two District of Columbia parents who are very involved with their children's education. First, we will have Virginia Walden, who is a single mother of three. Her youngest son attends a local private high school, with some help from neighbors, friends, and people in the neighborhood.

Next, we will hear from Wesley Walker-Bey, who is a single father of four and has children currently attending D.C. public schools. I look forward to hearing the testimony of both of you, and to also try to glean from you something that you think we ought to be doing. We will have an informal setting, but I do look forward to your testimony and some question afterwards.

First, Ms. Walden, thank you for joining us.

TESTIMONY OF VIRGINIA WALDEN, WASHINGTON, DC.

Ms. WALDEN. Thank you. It is an honor to appear before you to talk about school choice in the District. Having raised 3 children in D.C. over the last 20 years, I have been involved continually with the educational system. I have watched in horror as D.C. public schools deteriorated and stopped meeting the needs of its students, and I breathed a sigh of relief when two of my kids finished D.C. public high schools because I saw that it was getting progressively worse.

But I was still confident that I could get my third child through a D.C. public high school with my encouragement and my direction.

Senator BROWNBACK. Ms. Walden, pull that mike a little closer to you, if you would, or bend it down some, too. It is pretty directional. Thank you.

Ms. WALDEN. But I really wasn't prepared for the difficult times that were ahead for me and my youngest child in the educational system, or in D.C. After years of trying to be an involved parent, I was forced to reexamine traditional public education in D.C. as I watched my youngest child become totally disinterested in school. He became extremely disruptive and hostile about attending school. He was suspended a number of times, and I spent many hours at the schools trying to convince them that my child was very, very bright and not to suspend him again. Oftentimes, I was unable to keep that suspension from going through.

It was a constant struggle getting him to go to school. He talked to me about it many times, but oftentimes in anger, and if I really pushed him to do schoolwork at home or try to talk to him about it, a lot of times he would just leave and stay away for hours and hours or wouldn't talk to me and it was a real struggle. I just found myself in a position where I couldn't control him anymore and this was very, very scary for me.

But last summer, after he had spent 1 year in a District public high school and had such an awful time, I came home from work 1 day and was met by the police, and that was when everything really kind of came to a head. I knew that I had to make some decisions. I had to help this child because what I saw was really, really scary and disturbing.

There was a neighbor, a young man in the neighborhood who oftentimes I talked to him. He counseled some of the single mothers in the neighborhood about boys, and we talked about it and I cried on his shoulder and expressed to him what despair I was in and how I didn't have any choices. Private school was just absolutely out of the question for me. We were struggling to make it from day to day, and I have a fairly good job, but it was very difficult.

A couple of weeks later, this same person came back to me and said, "We're going to help you." He had gathered a group of young men together and they made a commitment to help my son because they saw a lot of potential in him. So in September, William, my youngest son, entered a D.C. private school, and the changes in him have been incredible. I mean, he has just blossomed.

He, for the first time in his educational life, is enjoying school. He is succeeding academically. He is succeeding socially, which was an issue. He was getting in trouble so much, it stopped him from being able to participate in the social part of being a teenager. We talk for hours about school and we discuss what is going on in his classroom. Usually, when I get home, he is finished with homework, which is remarkable to me, and we can sit and look at the homework and discuss it. He has discovered he is a really good athlete and is running track, has earned a space and is really very good on the track team at his school.

Our relationship has just changed in incredible ways. I mean, he is my child again. This is a child that I am just absolutely enjoying. The change in him just made that much of a difference and it has been really dramatic in our particular case, but it has been wonderful. But I couldn't have done this without the help. I mean, there

was no way. I would sit down and I would try to think about ways to pay for him to go to a private school and it just was not feasible and I couldn't have done it without some assistance.

One of the things I think about most often and one of the things I worry about—and I do work with low-income mothers because it is my way of giving back to the community, and one of things I think about as I talk to them is that they have so few choices. I mean, I was really lucky that I was able to get a neighbor to help, but if that neighbor hadn't helped, maybe I could have thought of something else. Maybe I could have sent him back down South to my family.

But these parents have no choices. They are just forced to keep their children in schools that are just horrible, and they crowd them in. They talk to me about it and I think that is what we have to do. That is why I am here today. I mean, we have to make sure that we are providing some kind of way to enable parents that have no choice to provide a way to make sure that their children are armed with the education that will get them into the future.

Thank you.

Senator BROWNBACK. I look forward to having further discussion with you. Congratulations.

Ms. WALDEN. Thank you.

Senator BROWNBACK. I can just see it in your eyes, the joy and the pleasure after the struggle that you have been through. I look forward to some questions and some interaction.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Walden follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MS. WALDEN

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: It is an honor to appear before you to discuss school choice in the District of Columbia from a parent's perspective.

Having raised three children in D.C. over the last 20 years, I have been involved continually with the educational system. I watched in horror as District public schools deteriorated and stopped meeting the needs of its students. With my older children I breathed a sigh of relief when they completed their studies in District high schools—one going on to college. I was glad, that with the problems getting progressively worse, at least two of my children were finished. But I was still confident that I would be able to encourage and direct my youngest child, as I had the others, and he too, would finish a D.C. public high school.

I was not prepared for the difficult times ahead for me and my youngest child in the educational system. After years of trying to be an involved parent who made a difference, I was forced to reexamine traditional public education in D.C. as I watched my son become totally disinterested in school. He became extremely disruptive and hostile about attending school. He was suspended many times and I spent countless hours at his school trying to convince teachers and administrators that my child was really very bright and begging them not to suspend him again. The older he got the more horrible the situation became. It became a constant struggle getting him to do any kind of school work at home and if I pushed too hard he would get very angry, often leaving the house for hours. It seemed to be a desperate situation. I could not control him any more and to be perfectly honest I was scared to death. But everything came to a head when he was brought home by the police 1 day last year. I knew that something had to be done to help this child. But I didn't know what options I had. As a single mother, I knew that private schools were out of the question. I could not afford to pay tuition. I discussed my frustrations with a neighbor who had, at various times, helped me with my son. We both agreed that a private school with a different environment would be the answer for William. He encouraged me to hold on and have faith. Two weeks later this neighbor returned with a commitment from several men who had grown up in our community, to pay my son's tuition as their way of giving back to the community. William entered a private high school in September, 1997.

The changes in him have been extraordinary. He is, for the first time in his educational experience, enjoying school and succeeding academically and socially. It is so wonderful for me to see him having such a great time in school. We talk about his school work every day, with him often starting the discussion. He is usually finished with his homework by the time I arrive home in the evening. He has discovered that he is a good athlete and has earned a place on the school track team. Our relationship has changed in ways that did not seem possible a year ago. I no longer see anger and frustration in his eyes and the friends he has chosen are young people that have wonderful plans for the future and so does William. For us, the transition from public to private school has been dramatic and exciting.

Of course, I could not have done this without some financial assistance. I shudder to think what would have happened to my child if he had continued in the direction he was going. And I feel despair for the mothers who find themselves in the position I was in—with no choices. I was lucky to have a neighbor who saw potential in my son and could help my family have a happy ending. But so many families won't have that chance. Everything must be done now to make sure that we are providing ways that will allow parents to make the choices that will ensure that their children will be equipped with the best education possible.

Senator BROWNBACK. Mr. Walker-Bey, thank you very much for joining us today and we look forward to hearing your testimony.

TESTIMONY OF WESLEY WALKER-BEY, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. WALKER-BEY. Yes, sir. Good morning, Senator, ladies and gentlemen. I am Wesley Walker-Bey, as the record reflects. First of all, I would like to start off by giving a little background information on myself.

At one time, I would have considered myself a private person and a whole lot of other things I could have read into it, but today I have no problem sharing some of my most darkest secrets. I have been from a treatment program, which is a drug treatment program, for approximately 9 months. When I was released—and let me clarify the type of drugs that I was using at the time. I was on heroin, as well as alcohol, and that was a devastating experience for me because I had two children that I had to support and they are relatively young, and I was not there to support those children.

But, anyway, approximately 9 months ago I was released from treatment and I found myself in a very, very, very confusing, uncomfortable situation. By that, I mean I had to take care of my children. I had to start doing things that any responsible parent would do. I have a daughter. She is 12 years old and she is developmentally delayed and she is in special education. I have a son. He is 8 years—well, one of my sons, this particular one, is 8 years old and he has a problem and I believe the psychiatrist referred to it as hyperactive, etc. So both of those two children are in special education.

When I came home, my daughter, she could not read nor write. She didn't even know her alphabet. I made it a point to communicate with her teacher, at least once a week, because I wanted the teacher to try and devote more time with her and to make her personal assessment and to try to come up, with me, some type of way that we could help her without having to take her to the psychiatrist or a psychologist, whatever.

I must say that her teacher appeared to have a personal involvement with my child. However, in spite of all of that, she still could not read. For the past 4 months, I have worked closely with my daughter and I am happy to report this morning that, with my help

and assistance, my daughter, she now knows her ABC's. She has begun to read. She is just progressing very much.

My son, he appeared to have a behavioral problem, disruptive in school. These are some of the reports that the teachers submitted to me and we discussed them whenever I went to his school. And unfortunately—and I wasn't looking for the teacher or teachers to do any miracles, but I did expect them, and I still expect them to do their share. Unfortunately, I did not see any improvement in his behavior until I got personally involved with that process.

I have observed that his behavior has changed. Fortunately, I knew a person; he is a professional man, he is a therapist, and he has been working with me without charging me anything because—and let me add this—I work 2 days a week as a counselor in a group home and I don't make but \$6 an hour and it is utterly impossible for me, as much as I would like to, to send my children to a private school.

This counselor, or this therapist, he works with me and he has professionally reported that my son has begun to improve behaviorally as well as in other areas. And I am saying that to say this. I think that it was—well, let me say this first. I think the best thing that could have happened to me was when I was invited to testify or say something before this hearing, and when I speak I am not speaking just for myself. I think that the Senators who are opposing this particular voucher or this bill, measure, or whatever it is that you call it—what they need to do is get with you, Senator, and just walk around some of those schools and just look; go to some of those neighborhoods and just watch the children going to school and coming from schools. And it is no secret because it is just conventional and public information and knowledge when you look in the paper.

I don't even think teachers have time to concentrate on their classes—the killings. And I think the sister here mentioned something about the detector machine that they have in school. This is a disgrace. I don't think that you would have to walk into a private school—that would be an affront, I think, to any parents in here to walk into a school and have to go through a detector, a metal detector, that type of thing. And, my brief experience incarcerated at a drug program—whenever I walk into a school and I see that, it takes me back to being in an institution. That is a retardation for a pupil's, a person's education process. I mean, it is almost unheard of.

Now, like myself, there are so many parents who would love to send their children to a private school because, in my personal opinion—and I know that I am being objective—it is almost a waste of time. Personally, I don't understand why the Senators, Congressmen, and Representatives are not supporting your cause, because I know they must read the newspapers; they must hear about the killings in schools.

How, in good conscience, could a human being—it doesn't have to be a Senator, Congressman, or Representative—how could an individual, in good conscience, not support this measure or this bill, this voucher? I don't understand it.

I feel good that I have been instrumental in helping my son and my daughter make some educational progress, and I feel bad that

the schools have not been able to do the same thing. I know that I have a responsibility as a parent, and by the same token I understand that our teachers have a responsibility and I don't think that that responsibility is being carried out, for whatever reasons.

But, Senator, it all boils down to poor persons like myself and others have no other choice. And what is going to happen is, because of the situation existing in those schools, what you are going to turn out is a bunch of little hoodlums.

Senator BROWNBACK. A bunch of what?

Mr. WALKER-BEY. Little hoodlums, because this is all they see in most cases. Now, there are some exceptions, but unfortunately very few in terms of what is happening in our public schools. So these children, they see these things. I mean, the situation has got so bad that I think they are putting signs around in different neighborhoods saying "no-drug area." I mean, that was unheard of in my time, and only recently. I mean, it is just that bad and it is obvious.

The penalties for selling drugs around schools have increased because that is the reality of the situation. Why? It shouldn't have to be that way, but in spite of all of that, we have to send our children to schools that are ravaged by those types of dismal situations, and it is pitiful.

Again, I want to say that with all that is happening in our public schools—and I want to put emphasis on public schools—instead of turning out scholastic individuals, more than likely over half of them—and I have not researched on this; I don't need it because I see it—are going to turn out potential high-at-risk criminals.

It shouldn't be a whole lot to that, Senator, in terms of having to talk about it at this hearing. Washington knows it, Maryland knows it, and all of the United States knows about the public schools, and not just here in Washington, but it is all over. So I think that like the madame here and others that she is representing, as well as myself, what needs to be done is to just take down all of the public schools and just make all of the schools private so those individuals can get a realistic, substantial—

Senator BROWNBACK. You need to pull that microphone up to you, Mr. Bey.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. So I don't have any paper; I don't need it. Like I said earlier, I live in the neighborhood, from the hood. You have heard the expression "the hood." And I am around those schools. I visit my daughter's and son's schools and I am aware of what is happening, and it is not just happening on Mondays and then skips and not happen to Saturday; it is every day. It is disgusting, it is miserable, and it is counterproductive to the whole learning process.

I don't know anything else that I could say and I don't want to sound redundant, repeat myself, but I am just trying to give it to you, Senator, as we would say in the hood, in the raw.

Thank you.

Senator BROWNBACK. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Walker-Bey, for giving it just that way. We have sent this scholarship bill to the President and I would like to send him a message, just very clear, and as you say, very clear and blunt and in the raw. A number of students in the District of Columbia need this option. A

number of parents in the District of Columbia desire this option passionately for their children, just as the two of you do.

I noted in the *Washington Post* article, April 30, that there were a number of D.C. parents that applied for this private scholarship program that I talked about earlier, and listen to this. There was a computerized lottery; it was held Monday. Out of the 7,500 that applied, 1,000 were going to get these private scholarships. The scholarships weren't going to pay for the whole cost of education, they were only going to pay for between 30 and 60 percent of private school tuition, so the parents still had to come up with the majority in many cases, not in all cases, of that funding.

Listen to what this one woman said, Karen Leach. She is a single mother who works at night as a security guard and won one of the scholarships. She just said this, "I prayed every day, I just prayed every day. I just want my kids to have the best that I can get for them." That is what every parent wants for their child. That is why every Member of Congress does not send their children to the D.C. public schools, why the President doesn't, why the Vice President doesn't, because they want the best for their children.

And yet some are in a financial category where they just cannot do it, and we are asking the President—all we are talking about is \$7 million here. We are not raiding the public schools. If you would get the public schools up to grade, then people wouldn't be pulling their children out of public schools. We are just asking the President, let these people go, let them have a choice that you have, that every Member of Congress has. But, unfortunately, the two witnesses here represent so many other parents in the District that, because of financial difficulties, don't have this option, and you should have this option.

And I think it will help the D.C. public schools. My own personal opinion is competition has never hurt anybody. It makes you stronger, it makes you better, and yet we have a public education monopoly in the District of Columbia that doesn't provide these sorts of options and doesn't have to worry about competition. It has got a captive marketplace in place.

Let me ask a couple of questions, if I could. First, Ms. Walden, you say you basically had somebody in the neighborhood come forward, see potential in your son and say, "I will pull the money together to do this," is that correct?

Ms. WALDEN. That is absolutely correct, a young man who has worked in the community who is kind of the adviser for our kids. There are a lot of single parents, single mothers particularly, in our neighborhood, and he has always been around. He grew up in the neighborhood and he just worked with the kids. My son, he really thought was a nice kid. Even though he was giving me a fit, this young man saw the potential and got another group of young men who had also grown up in the community to invest and they have paid his tuition this year.

Senator BROWNBACK. How many people have pulled together?

Ms. WALDEN. I think there were eight in the original group, but I think he has even managed to get other people to contribute during the year for other things. But I have also contributed. I mean there are other costs involved, so I have had to put in what I could, but it has been quite an experience. But I would not have been able

to do it without them. I mean, it would have just been too much for me.

Senator BROWNBACk. And I take it not that many parents are as fortunate as you?

Ms. WALDEN. Absolutely not.

Senator BROWNBACk. Most parents don't have somebody that just comes in and drops this in front of them.

Ms. WALDEN. No, most parents aren't as lucky as I am. I have had just an incredibly blessed life, for some reason. But most of the parents that I have worked with through the years—and I work a lot in the community with people that need a mentor. So I have been kind of a mentor to a lot of young mothers who don't have those choices. I mean, they don't have anybody that can step in because most of the people in their immediate neighborhood are struggling along with them. So it is not a choice that they have.

There are always people that will come in and help in the community, like me, even though I can't help them financially. I help them in other ways, but I can direct them. One of the big arguments as I have talked about this particular issue is that low-income mothers won't be able to get the other part of the money that will be required because this won't pay for full tuition.

And one of the things that I try to do myself with some other women is to try to talk to them about maybe talking to churches or going to their extended families, and they are very conscientious about the creative ways of raising the additional funds. So I think that is what we have a responsibility to do for them.

Senator BROWNBACk. Ms. Walden, you mentioned that you work with a number of single mothers in helping them out and that is your way of helping. What percentage, would you estimate, would like to have the option of being able to send their children to a private school?

Ms. WALDEN. I think in the group of women that I work with, a hundred percent of them would like to get their children out of the Southeast schools that they are in because this group that I work with, their kids are in schools in Southeast Washington and they are really disturbed.

Senator BROWNBACk. Why do they want their children out of those public schools?

Ms. WALDEN. They see better opportunities for them. They see things that they didn't get. A lot of these young mothers have not finished school themselves. They dropped out of school themselves because the conditions in their schools were bad, and now they are seeing their children doing the same thing and they want to have a better life for them. They don't want them to live the life they are living.

Senator BROWNBACk. And they see this as the ticket out, a changed lifestyle for their children?

Ms. WALDEN. Absolutely. The environment in which these kids go to school, and a good example—one mother called me not too long ago and said that she was just really disturbed that an administrator at her school had just decided she didn't like her child and it was making it really difficult. And we reported it and nobody helped.

Now, I would have gone and probably removed the kid from the school if that were a continuing problem, but where is she going to take her kid? Her child has to stay in that school and we have to work through their problem. So what she has decided to do is be there everyday to protect her child. Those are horrible conditions to try to educate a child, and the child knows why her mother is there.

So I think what happens is they see themselves pushed against the wall. They don't have—there is nothing they can say, there is nothing they can do except be there, and then the child is really not going to get a quality education in that kind of environment, whether the parents are there or not.

So, yes, these parents think that to get a better life for their child means getting them out of schools that are not meeting their kids' needs and that are not doing what they are supposed to be doing, and D.C. schools are not. I mean, personally, I tried to stick with D.C. schools. I tried to stay with them because I am a product of public education and my parents were public school teachers.

But I started seeing it get just horrible for William, for my son, and there was absolutely no way I was going to allow him to stay in that kind of environment and it didn't matter what I had to do, and my other choice was to send him away. That was my only choice.

Senator BROWNBACK. Let me put some statistics behind what you are sensing from the people that you advise and counsel with. Seventy-eight percent of the fourth grade students in the District of Columbia public schools are below basic reading achievement levels—78 percent. Eleven percent of the students in the D.C. public schools have avoided going to school for safety reasons—11 percent. Eleven percent of the students in the D.C. public schools report being threatened or injured with a weapon during the past year—11 percent threatened or injured with a weapon during the last year. I think the people you are working with have good cause.

Ms. WALDEN. Well, actually, I think it is even higher than that, I mean, and it is not just Southeast. I live in Northeast and he was going to a school in Northwest, and I came home and he always talked to me about kids having weapons in school.

Just to show you how interesting our whole situation is, the other night we had a parent meeting at the private school where William is at and parents were complaining about things that were occurring at the school, stuff the kids were doing. They were getting in trouble writing on the walls or whatever. And we were really quiet. William kind of looked at me and I kind of looked at him and we didn't say much, and they went on. There were 130 parents at this meeting and they went on and on and on about all the things that they needed to do to change this, and they were going to have these parent groups that came up to the meeting.

So when we got ready to leave and William and I left to go home, we were talking about it on the way home and said, "You know, ma, if they had been where I was, they would not be complaining. This is minor stuff compared to what we have been through." And we smiled and kind of laughed about it, but it was so good to finally have him in a situation where it is something in the past and

it is not something we were experiencing right now. So I mean it just made an incredible difference in our lives.

And William was involved in a lot of violence. I mean, he had a lot of problems. We smile and laugh now because he is a great kid and he is doing great, but he put me through a lot, and put himself through a lot, a lot of really damaging things.

Senator BROWNBACK. What swung it around for him? I mean, you describe a child that has really been, it looked like, heading the wrong way fast.

Ms. WALDEN. Well, I think he had some basic things that were there; they just got lost somewhere. I think putting him in an environment where people really cared—and these are things he said to me. Teachers listen to him. Class sizes are not so large that he feels lost. He is kind of shy anyway and he doesn't feel lost anymore.

The first of day school, he told me—he came home and I said, how did it go? And he said the halls were so quiet it was incredible. He said it was kind of scary. It was just that quiet. And I think he is a child that needed to feel like he was a part of something good, and in public school I think he was just getting lost. It was just too many things going on.

He also felt—and William is really smart. Academically, he has really excelled at this school this year. And I said, "Well, why weren't you doing that before?" And he said to me—and this is a story people have heard before, but it was actually said to me. He said at this school where he was before that he felt like if he acted too smart that he would be teased, because he saw other kids get teased and abused and beat up and all kinds of things because they were the A students.

So he decided in his 14-year-old mind last year that he was going to be a part of the cool kids and he was just not going to act smart. And, unfortunately, the cool kids in these schools were kids who got in really bad trouble. But he felt like he just couldn't excel; he couldn't do anything academic. And now he feels safe, I think. I think he feels like he can—I have great stories that I could probably entertain you with all day, but we went up to his parent-teacher conference the other night and I have always dreaded parent-teacher conferences because teachers always told me that William was the worst kid in the class and he stayed in trouble and could not do something with him.

Well, at this parent-teacher conference every teacher talked about he was a good—what a good boy he was and he was doing well in their classes. But he got a B in chemistry and so I wasn't going to go visit that teacher because I figured I would visit the teachers where he seemed to—they needed to talk to me a little bit more.

And he dragged me to this chemistry class. He said, "No. My teacher told me to bring you." And this lady sat down and she talked 10 minutes, with parents lined up outside the door, about what a fine student he was and how he has really tried and she has never had a child in her class, and on and on and on. I left there floating because I never ever thought this would happen with us, with William.

I was telling a friend earlier, it used to be the joke in my family that I better live a long time because nobody would take William; he was just too bad. So it has been dramatic. I mean, my child has—our situation has probably been much more dramatic than many others, but it did happen.

Senator BROWNBACk. Well, I hope people can watch your testimony because your eyes tell a lot more than your words do and you can see the glow in them of where you have been and where you are and where you see your son going.

Ms. WALDEN. He is going to be an engineer.

Senator BROWNBACk. Good. We have some good Kansas schools that teach engineering very nicely.

Ms. WALDEN. Absolutely.

Senator BROWNBACk. Mr. Walker-Bey, you talked about a daughter that was 12 years old, didn't know her alphabet, now does and is starting to read. Why didn't she know her alphabet at age 12? What was the problem here, or was it 14, even? What was the age of your daughter?

Mr. WALKER-BEY. Twelve; she is 12.

Senator BROWNBACk. Twelve, OK.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. I don't understand myself, I really don't, but I would have to say, as I stated earlier, I have to go back to the situation in the public schools. As I stated, she knows the alphabet now. She has begun to read a little. And I don't want to give her teacher something that she doesn't deserve, so I would just have to say that it is the school.

As I stated earlier, I guess so much is happening in the schools that oftentimes teachers don't have the time to concentrate and to give their full attention to the students. But I know that she could not read, nor did she know her alphabet until I had gotten totally involved with her educational process.

You know, Senator, the lady—what is your name?

Ms. WALDEN. Virginia Walden.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. Yes, Ms. Walden, she had mentioned something about how certain support groups had helped facilitate her son's growth. And when she said that, I had to reflect to an organization that I am a member of, and I want to get back to my daughter and my son, and the name of this organization is EFFORTS, and the acronym for EFFORTS is Employment for Former Offenders Receiving Treatment Services.

And it just doesn't embrace those individuals who have not been incarcerated or who have not had some type of bad experience or experiences in life, but it embraces everyone. As a matter of fact, the director of the program, Ms. Rachel Morrison—I am not going to say it was because of her that I am here today, but I know that I didn't have any money and she came and she picked me up and she brought me here.

And she is the director of that program and my being a member, I started to take my children there, and what I have discovered in both my daughter and son in the last couple of months is that they have talent. And this talent has been facilitated by way of getting involved in a drama group that is an extension of the concept of the program, EFFORTS. So, now, I have sat and watched my son and daughter discover their talents. He is a natural-born actor.

And we are in the process of going to an institution, Oak Hill. Are you familiar with the institution, Senator? It is a juvenile facility, Oak Hill, Maryland.

Senator BROWNBACk. Yes.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. And we are in the process of going there on Saturday to perform a play, and my son and daughter, they are a part of that play. So I mention that because it was by way of that program that I have begun to notice that my daughter and son have talent.

It was because—and I want to stay on the program, but I just want to show how when important, caring people get involved in your life, how it can make a difference, and I have seen how the program has made a difference in my children's lives. The program I have seen has brought mothers and children together because they have these discussion sessions. The program has turned out a lot of children who would otherwise be disruptive in school and made a difference in their lives.

So I guess when there is that caring, genuine caring, and involvement in a person's life, whether he is an adult or a child, it can make a difference.

Senator BROWNBACk. It can make a big difference.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. It can make a big difference. So back to your question, why do I think that my daughter could not read at the age of 12 years old—

Senator BROWNBACk. Just speak right into that mike. People are having trouble hearing you.

Mr. WALKER-BEY. OK. To answer your question as to why I don't think my daughter could read at the age of 12 years old, obviously the person or persons, the teacher or teachers, have not been able to get totally, for whatever reason—I would wish to attribute it to the situations in the school—they have not been able to get totally involved with my children in terms of their education, and that can make a difference, a negative difference.

Senator BROWNBACk. Well, thank you for that testimony, and I want to answer one of your questions that you posed about taking Members around to the public schools and have them see for their own eyes the same situation which I have gone into the D.C. public schools and looked at. The metal detectors are set more tightly to get into the schools than they are to get into the Nation's Capitol. The high school that I went to, I saw people struggling, working heroically, and nonetheless a system that has produced bad results within it, which leads me to think of systemic or systematic approaches that one ought to do to change it, and this is one of those.

In another sense, too, I don't think Members have to go look at the public schools. I think they already have, in determining what to do with their own children. They looked at the public schools and decided "I am not going here." They looked off of the objective test results. They looked at the issues of violence in these public schools and they said, "I don't care how much I believe in this sort of system, even though it is producing these sorts of problems. I am not going to put my child there," and then they went somewhere else.

And then they would still deny the choice for you to be able to do that, and that is what I find so abhorrent and that is why I con-

tinue to plead with the President, sign this bill so that these children can have the same choices that Chelsea did. And maybe it isn't to the same type of school, but they can have that sort of choice because you know every parent in the world desires that for their child, the very best that they can possibly have. Yet, if they are relegated to a system that produces poor results and they don't have a way out of it, what then are they supposed to do?

You had a guardian angel that came in, Ms. Walden, thankfully, in your situation.

Ms. WALDEN. Absolutely.

Senator BROWNBACK. How many of those do we have around? Not enough. We could use a few more. This is simply to try to provide that choice.

So I want to thank the panel for joining us today. This is an important time period because the bill does sit on the President's desk, or will soon be there, and the President will have the option then of joining a majority of both the House and the Senate in signing this bill, a \$7 million measure that would provide low-income parents with the option of being able to send their children to a different school other than the D.C. public school system. I plead with the President to do just that. It is the right thing to do, as you noted, Mr. Walker-Bey. It is the right thing to do, and how could you look in the eyes of these children and relegate them to any other type of choice?

Thank you both. Thank you for being involved parents, as well, and we appreciate it greatly.

The meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 10:29 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

