

“Your colleagues will wonder along with you as you examine this strange era when we granted government monopolies control of the most valuable and important enterprises in town, and so many people fought furiously to keep doors to many of the best schools closed to poor children.

“They will ask, how could this have ever happened in America, at a time when the ideas of freedom, choice and opportunity were sweeping the rest of the world?”

My prediction might not have been right, but not because we didn’t try.

In 1984, I gave a speech at the University of the South outlining the “deep ruts” into which American K-12 education had fallen. One of those was the lack of school choice for parents.

In 1985, the National Governors Association (NGA) embarked on a project called “Time for Results.” We divided into seven task forces, each chaired by a governor, to ask seven of the toughest questions you could ask about American education. One of those questions was, “Why not let parents choose the schools their children attend?” The task force working on that question was chaired by the Democratic governor of Colorado, Richard Lamm, who said then, “You know, it is interesting that America is a land of choices. We have 100 breakfast cereals to choose from, 200 different makes of cars. But in this one educational area . . . we have not done a lot in choice.”

Then in 1992, President Bush proposed his “GI Bill for Children,” which was a plan to allow states and cities to give \$1,000 annual scholarships in new federal dollars to each child of a middle- and low-income family in a participating state or locality.

Families could spend the scholarships at any lawfully operated school—public, private or religious.

And up to half of the scholarship could be spent on other academic programs, like a Saturday math tutoring program or a summer accelerated language course.

That year, the Carnegie Foundation had reported that 28 percent of our nation’s parents would like to send their child to a different school.

Today, that number is even higher—it is, in fact, more than twice as high. A recent 2013 Luntz Global study found that 64 percent of parents said that “if given the financial opportunity,” they would send one or all of their children to a different school.

The last 23 years have seen some positive changes in the ability of parents to choose their children’s schools.

Today all 50 states and Washington, D.C. offer to some students alternatives to the school they would normally be assigned based on their residence.

Approximately 15 percent of school-age children attend a school other than their school of residence through open-enrollment programs.

Policies in 42 states allow some, or all, parents to send their children to public schools outside their districts.

Of those 42 states—15 states require districts to participate, 23 allow them to participate, and three require it specifically for low-income students and students in failing schools.

In 31 states, parents are allowed to choose among schools within their district.

Of those 31 states—16 states require districts to participate, 10 allow them to participate, and 6 require it for low-income students or students in failing schools 6 states.

More than 2.5 million—or nearly five percent of all public school children—are enrolled in more than 6,000 public charter schools in 42 states and D.C. Typically parents choose to enroll their children in these schools.

In addition, today more than 300,000 children are served by 41 private school choice programs across 19 states, D.C., and Douglas County, Colorado. These programs often give students who meet certain criteria—usually based on income, special needs, or academic performance—an opportunity for a voucher, tax credit program, or education savings account to allow them to attend private schools.

Also, the option for homeschooling is available in all states and parents of about three percent of school-age children choose to homeschool.

Allowing students to choose among schools is not a new idea for the federal government.

Allowing federal dollars to follow students has been a successful strategy in American education for 70 years.

In 1944, the G.I. Bill allowed veterans to choose among colleges, public or private.

Today, about \$136 billion in federal grants and loans continue to follow students to the college or university of their choice.

Just last year, Congress reauthorized the \$2.4 billion Child Care and Development Block Grant program, or CCDBG, which, when combined with other federal and state funding, helps approximately 900,000 families pay for child care of their choice while they work or attend school, mostly through vouchers.

These are among the most successful and popular federal programs—why is it so hard to apply the same sorts of choices to elementary and secondary schools?

What can the federal government do now to expand the opportunity parents have to choose the most appropriate school for their children?

The first is Scholarships for Kids. This is a bill I introduced that would use \$24 billion of the federal dollars we spend each year on K-12 education and allow states to create \$2,100 scholarships to follow 11 million low-income children to any public or private school of their parents’ choice.

Also, the discussion draft I’ve just released to fix No Child Left Behind gives states the option of using \$14.5 billion in Title I money to follow 11 million low-income children to the public school they attend.

Most people agree that Title I money, which is supposed to help low-income kids, gets diverted to different schools because of a formula that targets money to districts based on how much states spend per student. That is largely influenced by teacher salaries.

The simplest way to solve that problem is to let that money follow the child to the school they attend. You could do that to just public schools, which has been the tradition with Title I money, or to private schools, which is what I would prefer.

The second is the CHOICE Act. This is a proposal by Senator Tim Scott to allow about \$11 billion the federal government now spends for children with disabilities to follow those six million children to the schools their parents believe provide the best services.

I think it’s important to note that these bills do not require states to do anything—instead they give them the option to have money follow the child.

The third is the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. Senator Scott’s CHOICE Act would also expand the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program that began in 2004 and has provided about 6,000 low-income students in Washington, D.C. with the opportunity to receive a scholarship to attend a private school of their parents’ choice. Today, far more parents in the city have applied for the scholarships than have received them.

The fourth is expanding charter schools. In my final year as education secretary under

President George H. W. Bush, I wrote every school superintendent in America asking them to try this new idea from Minnesota called “start-from-scratch schools.” At the time there were only twelve of them. They were the first charter schools. Today there are more than 6,000.

Charter schools have had strong bipartisan support—including from President Clinton and Secretary Duncan.

We’ve got in our discussion draft provisions that would streamline and update the existing Charter Schools Program to:

Provide grants to State entities to start new charter schools and to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools.

Provide grants to entities to enhance credit methods to finance charter school facilities.

Provide grants to charter management organizations, like KIPP or Rocketship in my home state of Tennessee, to replicate or expand high-quality charter schools.

Our goal is to grow the federal investment in expanding and replicating high-quality charter schools with a demonstrated record of success, and hold charter schools accountable for their performance.

Other senators also have some good proposals. Senators Paul and Lee both have bills to allow federal dollars from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to follow low-income children to the public or private school of their parents’ choice. Senator Rubio has a bill that creates a new federal tax credit for individual and corporate donations to organizations that provide low-income students with private school scholarships.

As for the future, I think I’ve learned my lesson—I’m not about to make a prediction.

It looks like it will be a while before school choice will be a matter of history.

But the progress so many have made is impressive—there is plenty of opportunity to do more.

As Ross Perot told me in 1984, “Changing the public schools of Texas was the hardest, meanest, bloodiest thing I’ve ever tried to do.”

Since I’m not going to make a prediction then I’ll end with a question—the same one I asked in 1992: If we trust parents to choose child care for their children, and we trust them to help their children choose a college to attend—and both those systems have been so successful—why do we not also trust them to choose the best elementary or high school for their children?

HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

NAVY SPECIAL WARFARE OPERATOR FIRST CLASS WILLIAM MARSTON

Ms. AYOTTE. Mr. President, I wish to honor the life of William “Blake” Marston, a Navy SEAL from New Hampshire who was tragically killed in the line of duty.

Blake Marston was an extraordinary man who served our Nation with honor, courage, and commitment. His decision to become a Navy SEAL and take risks in training and combat missions alike speaks to his love of country and his dedication to serving his fellow Americans. His ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty leaves all New Hampshire citizens in Blake’s debt.

Blake grew up in Bedford, NH, where he excelled as a student athlete and was known by his coaches for being a hard worker and dedicated team member. He loved baseball and was an alpine ski racer. It is clear that Blake

was special from an early age. From his involvement in the church youth group, to his mentorship of young athletes, Blake was devoted to helping others.

At Stonehill College, Blake majored in criminal justice and studio arts, and it was during his senior year that he decided that he wanted to become a Navy SEAL—a member of the most elite special forces unit. Blake's athleticism, leadership, and determination provided him with the physical and mental toughness he needed to endure one of the most grueling training experiences in the world in order to become a SEAL. And he succeeded.

Blake's service to our Nation included two tours of duty in Afghanistan. He never let up on his desire to improve and be the best SEAL he could be. Just as he put in the time in his backyard with his dad honing his baseball skills, he also worked tirelessly at being the best that he could be as a defender of our country.

Blake died training to conduct the kinds of missions that keep Americans safe. We owe our freedom and security to Blake and the men and women like him in our armed services.

During the Celebration of Life service held in Blake's honor, his family, friends, and classmates described a young man who was kind, compassionate, thoughtful, and funny—a gentle giant, yet also a highly trained, elite warrior. In describing his devotion to his fellow SEALs, Blake once remarked to his father, "You know, Dad, I can't possibly imagine being in any other profession where I have such respect and love for my teammates."

Blake will be laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, a hero surrounded by his brothers in arms.

My thoughts and prayers are with Blake's parents Nancy and Bill, and sister Emily, who have lost a loving son and brother. May God bless Blake and his family.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

REMEMBERING MASTER SERGEANT JAMES WILLIAM HOLT

• Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, this Saturday, February 7, 2015, members of the Hempstead County community will gather for a memorial service for MSG James William Holt of Hope, AR, who was killed in action in Vietnam in 1968.

The service will take place on the 47th anniversary of Master Sergeant Holt's heroic actions and will coincide with the return of his remains for proper burial.

In the early morning hours of February 7, 1968, the North Vietnamese Army launched a massive, coordinated tank and infantry assault on the Special Forces Camp at Lang Vei that created numerous casualties among the troops defending the base.

As a Special Forces medic, Master Sergeant Holt raced around the com-

pound, while under heavy fire, to administer aid to the wounded and move them to safety. His valiant actions during the assault did not end there.

While not a weapons specialist, Master Sergeant Holt nonetheless was a professional Special Operations soldier who knew how to fire every weapon in that camp accurately and effectively. He was also a decisive leader who took charge of a silent 106 mm recoilless rifle and brought it to life, destroying three enemy tanks before running out of ammunition.

Master Sergeant Holt then supplied himself with light anti-tank weapons and charged into the face of the enemy, single-handedly attacking the tank formation, and allowing time for his brothers-in-arms to fight their way to safety. When two enemy tanks broke through the perimeter, Master Sergeant Holt delivered deadly fire on them, scoring a direct hit on one of the armored vehicles.

The Battle of Lang Vei was a short, but costly battle that could have even worse for American forces if it were not for Master Sergeant Holt's heroics. For his acts of bravery, Master Sergeant Holt was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action and the Purple Heart.

I was at the ceremony in 2013 when Master Sergeant Holt was posthumously inducted into the Arkansas Military Veterans Hall of Fame and I wish I could be onhand when the community honors him this weekend. These tributes will help ensure Master Sergeant Holt's remarkable story of bravery and selfless sacrifice forever lives on.●

TRIBUTE TO SERGEANT JUSTIN MAHANA

• Mr. HELLER. Mr. President, I wish to recognize Sgt Justin Mahana for his courageous act to help others. After driving from Las Vegas to Lake Havasu, AZ, to help a coworker whose car had broken down, Sergeant Mahana stopped at a gas station to check that his own car was ready for the trip back to Nevada. While there, Sergeant Mahana witnessed a car crash into a median, leading him to investigate the accident and pull the driver out of the car as it lit into flames. It gives me great pleasure to recognize his bravery and his commitment to others both in this moment and throughout his life.

Sergeant Mahana, a 17-year veteran, joined the U.S. Air Force because he wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. His job entails the maintenance and upkeep of military vehicles that are used by pararescuemen when conducting combat search and rescue missions, as well as humanitarian relief operations. Both his commitment to the Air Force, as well as his daily actions, prove his regard for others.

I extend my deepest gratitude to Sergeant Mahana for his courageous contributions to the United States of

America and to freedom-loving nations around the world. His service to his country and his bravery earn him a place among the outstanding men and women who have valiantly defended our Nation.

His commitment to helping those around him, as well as serving the country, demonstrates his unwavering selfless character. His actions represent only the greatest of Nevada's values, including a sense of community and an obligation to help others.

As a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I recognize that Congress has a responsibility not only to honor these brave individuals who serve our Nation, but also to ensure they are cared for when they return home. I remain committed to upholding this promise for our veterans and servicemembers in Nevada and throughout the Nation.

During his tenure, Sergeant Mahana has demonstrated professionalism, commitment to excellence, and dedication to the highest standards of the Air Force. I am both humbled and honored by his service and am proud to call him a fellow Nevadan. Today, I ask my colleagues to join me in recognizing Sgt. Justin Mahana for all of his accomplishments and wish him well in all of his future endeavors.●

REMEMBERING DAVID LEE THOMAS, SR.

• Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, I rise today to pay tribute to David Lee Thomas, Sr. of Mobile, AL, who passed away on January 22, 2015. He and I were friends for many years. I first got to know him when I was a young Assistant U.S. attorney in Mobile and he was already a proven and respected Federal law officer. He had been hired as the first African-American investigator in the southeast region, with the office of inspector general, U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was investigating fraud by stores and businesses that were buying food stamps for cash or carrying on other unlawful activities. One of the highlights of his career with the OIG was receiving a letter from President Ronald Reagan for solving a fraud case which saved the U.S. Government \$10 million. During that time, we worked a number of cases together. Several went to trial, and he taught me a great deal about law, trials, and how fraud and abuse occur.

David retired from the OIG in 1990, but that retirement lasted all of 6 months. He began working at the Mobile Drug Coalition, and from there he began the second most rewarding career when he became the assistant director of the Mobile County Community Corrections Center. In that role, he established the Court Police Department and helped develop the Mobile County Drug Court Program, which was the first of its kind in Alabama.

David loved his community and was involved in many organizations to make Mobile a better place to live. He