

How School Choice Helped My Family Achieve the American Dream

Testimony on:

“Educational Freedom and Opportunity for American Families, Students, and Workers”

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Testimony by:

Hera Varmah

School Choice Beneficiary

hvarmah@federationforchildren.org

Good morning, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Hera Varmah, and my story is a testament to the power of school choice to help achieve the American dream.

I am one of 12 siblings born into an immigrant family from Liberia and the Caribbean. As of this testimony, my three elder brothers have all completed their college journeys. One now works as a mechanical engineer at a Tampa-based firm, the second is pursuing a medical degree, while the third thrives as a chemical engineer at GE Healthcare in South Carolina. Our family's pursuit of education doesn't end there. This year, we have six siblings attending six different universities, and two more in high school. After obtaining my bachelor's degree in food science and technology from Florida A&M University, a historically Black land-grant university, I now work full-time in education policy, where I am dedicated to enabling other students to access the same life-changing opportunities that transformed my own family.

Every one of us is well on our way to building fulfilling careers and forging our way toward successful lives. Without school choice, a different story could have been told.

My parents immigrated to the United States searching for a better opportunity. As my siblings and I were growing up, they would stop at nothing to give us the best education possible, one that aligned with our family's values and set us up for success in their adopted country. My parents strongly believed that hard work paired with a strong moral foundation makes education powerful. But budgets were a challenge in a large family, and the local district schools were not a good fit for all of us. Simply put, my family's success wouldn't have been possible without school choice.

Growing up with eleven siblings in one house was a struggle, but we were determined. My parents taught my siblings and I from an early age that odds against you are meant to be broken. Failure was simply not an option. This foundation lit a fire under us to defy the odds. Thanks to the Florida tax-credit scholarship program, we were able to find schools that met our unique learning needs and allowed these dreams to become reality. This scholarship provided the opportunity for my siblings and me that simply would not have existed otherwise.

Without my parents being blessed with the choice of which school to send us to, we would not be where we are today. Nine out of the twelve received and benefited from the Florida tax-credit scholarship. So, when people say that school choice doesn't work, I simply show them my family.

Unfortunately, although polling shows that Americans in both parties support school choice, too many states still choose to limit education options for their citizens. I am proud to be a Floridian and a constituent of Mr. Buchanan, but families in other states deserve the same chances I had.

Congress should expand parental choice in education, including through the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA). If the act passes, not only will it help more parents and students in states that already have some form of school choice, but importantly it will also help parents and students in those that lack real school choice. This act would devote \$10 billion annually to empowering parents like mine to select the optimal educational institution or service – offering hope for nearly two million children. The opportunities are endless, and thanks to states like Florida, the potential outcomes are not a mystery.

In the state of Florida, we are proud to host the largest school choice programs in the entire nation. What started as a modest tax credit scholarship program serving a limited number of students in 2001 has grown into multiple programs, available to every family, with over 250,000 students this year alone who have been awarded a scholarship and enrolled in a school of choice.¹ Florida has been a pioneer in the field of school choice for over two decades.

Growing up, I always knew that Florida was a special place for education choice – I saw it in my own home every day. As I have learned more about the policy in my career, I have learned just how fortunate I was. Our state has a variety of school choice programs that cater to the needs of special education students, those who have faced bullying or harassment, and most recently, every family in the state whose children may need another option. A testament to the success of school choice can be found in Miami-Dade, where over 70 percent of students opt for schools outside their designated ZIP code, whether public or private, and public schools are making important

¹ ReimaginED. "More than 100,000 new students: Breaking down the historic growth in Florida school choice scholarships." 11 October 2023. Accessed from: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2023/10/more-than-100000-new-students-breaking-down-the-historic-growth-in-florida-school-choice-scholarships/>

gains right alongside their choice counterparts.² The future of education is customized, not one-size-fits -all, and I got to experience that future of education growing up.

My home state clearly shows that you do not have to choose between supporting students in public or private education. As it has expanded parental choice in education, Florida has made significant educational progress, moving from the 35th to the 3rd and 4th position on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), often called the nation’s report card.³ As reported in ReimaginED, the publication of Florida’s largest education choice provider, Florida has more than twice as many students who are using school choice scholarships to choose their education than there are in the other 49 states combined.⁴ My home state has not only demonstrated its success within our borders but has also set the standard for numerous other states to begin to embrace the transformative changes we witness today. School choice is not a mysterious concept; it represents the crucial opportunity that countless families require. My own family shows the opportunity it can unlock.

My purpose is to do all that I can so that my personal journey is not a rare, one-in-a-million anomaly but rather a daily occurrence in the lives of families across the nation.

The idea of families, even of limited means, being able to choose the right education for their children might seem like an impossible dream to many. To me, it was a given. I did not always realize how fortunate my family was.

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to be part of the Future Leaders Fellowship with the American Federation for Children, which taught me many things. The Future Leaders Fellowship Program brings together college students from across the country who have benefited from school choice programs. We share common experiences, coming from diverse yet often impoverished backgrounds, each finding schools that we needed to succeed and being able to attend thanks to school choice programs. But it was in these conversations that I first began to realize how different

² Matus, Ron. “Miami’s Choice Tsunami.” *Education Next*, Fall 2023. Accessed from:

<https://www.educationnext.org/miami-choice-tsunami-carvalho-competition-transformation-miami-dade/>

³ WQCS. “Florida Ranks 3rd in the Nation in Grade 4 Reading and 4th in Grade 4 Mathematics.” 24 October 2022.

Accessed from: <https://www.wqcs.org/2022-10-24/florida-ranks-3rd-in-the-nation-in-grade-4-reading-and-4th-in-grade-4-mathematics>

⁴ ReimaginED. “More than 100,000 new students: Breaking down the historic growth in Florida school choice scholarships.” 11 October 2023. Accessed from: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2023/10/more-than-100000-new-students-breaking-down-the-historic-growth-in-florida-school-choice-scholarships/>

my experiences were in Florida, with its robust programs, compared to others in states that still limited choice. The types of sacrifices and tradeoffs families had to make were serious, but families love their children and will do whatever it takes to help them succeed. Learning these stories, I became committed to changing the future for families like mine across America and realized my calling in public policy.

My experience is not unique, as many of my fellow Future Leaders have realized this calling to make a difference. As college students and now graduates, we have come from humble beginnings and had the opportunity to meet with national leaders, legislators, and advocates. We know our power and are prepared to embrace the future.

The actor Denzel Washington says, “don’t just aspire to make a living, aspire to make a difference.” Today, thanks to school choice, I don’t just aspire to make a difference – I know that I am making one.

Across the country, I have testified before state legislators, spoken on panels, and talked with families like mine about educational opportunities. Each state and community is different, but one thing unites families from coast to coast: They want the best for their children. Too many families in this country cannot fully realize this goal because they can neither afford to move to a school district that meets their needs nor pay for private tuition. Just like my parents stopped at nothing to give my siblings and me a better education, I have devoted my career to doing the same for families across the country whose hopes and dreams should not depend upon luck or family income.

In conclusion, the story of my family's journey is a testament to the transformational impact of school choice. It's a beacon of hope for families striving for a better future. School choice has opened doors and empowered us to reach our fullest potential. As you deliberate and make decisions that impact the future of education in our nation, I implore you to consider the countless lives like mine that have been changed by this simple yet profound concept. Let us continue to champion and expand school choice, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to access a quality education and reach for the stars.