

# IN THE NEWS:

An article from PA State Senator, Anthony Williams in the Wall Street Journal:

## Pennsylvania Kids Deserve School Choice

### Bad public schools hurt poor and rural children the most.

By **ANTHONY HARDY WILLIAMS**

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Under President Obama's new \$4.35 billion Race to the Top program, states can compete for funds by creating programs that improve the quality of their schools. The idea of rewarding school reform initiatives is good, but one-time grants from the federal government will not improve our public education system by itself.

Why? Because the \$400 million grant Pennsylvania now seeks represents less than half of 1% of the \$23 billion spent annually in my state's public school system. Given the thousands of dollars already being spent per student, an additional \$56 per child will be insignificant-unless it is accompanied by comprehensive school-choice reform.

Pennsylvania should adopt reform based on the same premise as the Race to the Top initiative: that competition for taxpayer dollars improves the quality of education.

School choice means supporting the full menu of educational options, including public schools, charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, and vocational schools, just to name a few. Parents should have the right to choose which school is best for their children. The money should follow the child.

Competition improves quality in every industry, including the field of education. Just as Race to the Top encourages competition, school choice in Pennsylvania would allow thousands of schools to compete for a piece of the \$23 billion spent annually on our public schools. It will spur innovation and improve schools across the state.

In the 2002 case *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the Supreme Court ruled that school-choice programs are constitutional and do not violate the establishment clause of the constitution. The *Zelman* decision has the potential to fulfill the promise of *Brown v. the Board of Education* true equality to education. But to fulfill that promise we must adopt a competitive framework.

Defenders of the status quo, including the teachers union, argue that the problem, particularly in our inner-city public schools, isn't lack of competition but lack of adequate funding. This is a myth.

Consider the facts in Pennsylvania: The Pittsburgh School District's \$19,882 per student ranks at No. 13 in spending among our 501 school districts. The Harrisburg City School District's per student spending of \$16,297 ranks at No. 37. The Philadelphia School District's May 2009 budget proposed total spending of \$3.186 billion to educate 193,536 students-an average of \$16,462 per student. What's more, these spending figures include lower-cost programs such as charter schools, adult education and pre-kindergarten, so it's conceivable that traditional K-12 public schools in these districts spend even more per pupil than we know. Yet these city districts still experience significant achievement gaps compared to many other districts in the state.

If a charter school or a private school spending between \$16,000 and \$20,000 per student doesn't produce positive results, parents will withdraw their children from the school and the school will deservedly fail. But parents don't have the option of withdrawing their children from a failing public school. Today's system permits failing schools to continue, penalizing less fortunate children who only get one chance for an education.

I was lucky. My mother was so frustrated by the unsafe neighborhoods I had to travel through to get to school, and the lack of stimulation once I was there, that she got a scholarship for me to attend a private school.

But it shouldn't depend on luck. As an African-American legislator, I've seen children in inner-city schools trapped, and I've seen kids in rural areas with no choice but to stay in underperforming schools. Changing the status quo is a big reason why I'm running for governor.

My mom was also a public school teacher, so make no mistake, I know how hard they work. At the same time, schools must also be able to terminate, not just reassign, poor performing teachers. And when we empower parents to choose the school that's best for their children, it serves as a constant audit of a school's quality because parents are able to leave bad schools and enroll their children in better performing schools.

I hope that Pennsylvania receives a Race to the Top grant. But unless we're willing to fundamentally change the system, the money's impact will be minimal. Children in our state can't wait any longer: Now is the time for school choice.

*Mr. Williams is a state senator from Pennsylvania*