



A mother's story sends message for school choice

By Jim Waters

Kentucky's public education system does a solid, if not spectacular, job – with about 25 percent of its students.

But what consolation do you draw from that if your child falls among the other 75 percent? And remember, a majority of that three-quarters remains either stuck in an inner-city, failing school or in the hinterlands without alternatives to a mediocre education.

Some of those students – graced with well-to-do parents – can move to a better school district or pay for a private school.

But very few in Kentucky can write that private school tuition check. What financial options do Kentuckians have to improve the plight of students in a state with an average per capita income of \$32,076?

Very few. Ask Virginia Walden-Ford, now executive director of [D.C. Parents for School Choice](#), who knows what it's like to face the same question without an answer.

Walden-Ford, a single, black mother of three children, faced the challenge in the 1990s while her son, William, drifted to gangs and academic failure in the Washington, D.C., school system.

“We started experiencing the police bringing him home,” Walden-Ford said. “It was a scary time for us. And he was invisible at school. The classes were large, and he was lost.”

A generous neighbor stepped up and gave Walden-Ford a check and a choice for her son to enroll in a better school.

“It just absolutely changed his life,” Walden-Ford said. “I saw him change in weeks and now, he's a fine young man. We had a happy ending, but a lot of boys in our neighborhood did not. I see them now — drug-addicted, in and out of jail.”

The experience didn't just change William. It changed his mother, too.

Walden-Ford told her story in Louisville last week. She dared Kentucky parents to fight for charter schools the same way she challenged parents trapped in D.C.'s poverty and failing schools. She'll let anyone who listens know: One mother can make a difference.

That cycle doesn't just spin in the inner city, either.

“It's the same story wherever I go – whether it's urban or rural communities: Kids aren't getting a fair shake if their parents don't have the resources,” Walden-Ford said.

The latest CATS and NCLB test scores from Kentucky's rural communities tell much the same story. They show that children in Kentucky – which, according to the [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#), ranks No.

47 in the nation in per capita personal income – start losing ground in school as they move into their middle- and high-school years.

In Whitley County, for example, 65 percent of 11th-graders failed to reach math proficiency, compared to zero percent of third-grade students. The results are dismal in science, too, where 78 percent of fourth-graders were proficient – compared to only 45 percent of 11th-graders.

If these students could become better students in a different school, why shouldn't they get that chance?

One reason they haven't gotten that chance in Kentucky is because of the opposition to school choice of teachers unions.

Bob Chanin, retiring general counsel of the [National Education Association](#), recently said that the NEA and its affiliates, including the Kentucky Education Association, are effective “not because we care about children and it is not because we have a vision of a great public school for every child. The NEA and its affiliates are effective advocates because we have power.”

Chanin gets an “A” for honesty. His union receives an “F” for abusing its power and exploiting Kentucky's children.

— *Jim Waters is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*