Growing up in a middle-class family in Erie, Pennsylvania, my brother, sister, and I didn’t have much in the way of luxuries. But we never lacked for love and support. Our parents did everything they could to make sure we would have more opportunities than they had. The key was a quality education. My dad worked two jobs all his life in order to send us to the best schools possible. He never complained. And I was never able to thank him enough.

The best way I know to thank all parents who care about their children’s education is to empower them to make the right choices. Recently Pennsylvania gave parents some powerful new tools. Elementary-school children who are struggling in reading and math can now qualify for $500 grants for after-school instruction. They can use these grants to purchase extra help at the education provider of their choice, public, private, or parochial. There’s no other program like it in the nation—but I predict there will soon be many others.

Another law I signed this year provides a tax credit to groups that donate public- and private-school scholarships for families. We expect this will leverage up to $40 million in school-choice scholarships by the second year.

You see, I believe that parental empowerment is incomplete without school choice. Families struggling to make ends meet should have the right to take their precious education dollars to whichever schools best fit their children’s needs. Wealthy families already have the ability to choose the best schools for their children. It’s time to level the playing field.

The traditional arguments in favor of school choice—that it will allow children to escape failing schools; that it will improve public education through competition—are well known. But consider one more: it will get parents more involved in their children’s education.

Parents have the ultimate responsibility for their children’s education. They’re the ones who check the homework, who attend the PTA meetings, who drive their sons and daughters to music lessons and basketball practice. In a nationwide survey recently conducted by the Educational Testing Service, parents and educators alike cited “lack of parental involvement” as the number one cause of school problems. The vast majority of parents do not run away from this responsibility; they embrace it. But too often our public school system shuts parents out, sending the message, subtly or otherwise, that they are not qualified to take charge of their children’s education.

Giving parents school choice would be like hanging a sign reading “Moms and Dads Wanted” in the windows of our classrooms. Schools competing for students will communicate with parents more often. Parents will be alerted sooner, rather than later, that their children may be in danger of falling behind.

My own parents and teachers communicated often—too often, I thought at the time. Now that I’m a father, I’ve come to realize what a blessing that was. When I had trouble reading in the 1st and 2nd grades, my parents worked with my teachers to help me solve the problem. It took after-school tutoring and some long hours of help from dedicated educators, but we did it. I want all families to have the same “early warning system” I enjoyed.

School choice is not for parents who are completely satisfied with their schools and their children’s performance in them. It’s for everyone else. Like the 50,000 families in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia who applied for just 2,000 scholarships donated by the Children’s Scholarship Fund in 1999. Or the 12,000 Pennsylvania parents currently on waiting lists to get into charter schools.

Those families should have the right to choose their schools. It’s not the entire solution. But it is an essential first step.

- Tom Ridge, former governor of Pennsylvania, is the Director of the U.S. Office for Homeland Security.