In the late 1950s and early 1960s, if you were a black basketball player in Milwaukee and thought you “had game,” there were two playgrounds to establish your credentials: Franklin Square and Lapham Park. I spent many hours on both courts.

Although there are new playgrounds today, the tradition continues. I see the young men and now young women playing “hustle” and “taking it to the hoop.” I look at them and I see my friends, Dewitt, Harry, Pickens, Marvin, and “Ham,” and myself. I see the young men we were when North Division High School became the first team from Milwaukee to play in the state tournament. I still feel the elation of our victories and the anguish of our one loss during our senior year—the championship game of the state tournament. The memories are still there, 44 years later.

Basketball is not the only memory of my youthful days. I recall how much my grandmother and my mother pushed the importance of education. In the 1940s my mother was a housekeeper for a white family in Shreveport, Louisiana. They paid my tuition at the Catholic school their children attended. My mother continued to send me to Catholic school when we moved to Milwaukee, where I attended St. Boniface Catholic School until the 8th grade. Because of our income, we were not required to pay tuition. To this day, neither my mother nor I know who paid for my education.

I transferred to public school because of my interest in sports and my desire to be with my friends. I never really thought about the difference between public and private schools. My mother and grandmother clearly thought private schools were better. But they both also fully supported my decision.

I never realized back then, as they obviously did, the importance of having choices for my education. Today I am fighting to make sure that children from low-income and working-class families in Milwaukee, indeed all over this country, have the same opportunity.

The term “choice” is often misunderstood by well-meaning people or distorted purposefully by people who want to discredit it. Choice is often equated only with vouchers. Vouchers are indeed one form of parental choice—a very important form. However, parental choice involves more than just vouchers. It means providing families with the capacity to choose from a wide range of learning environments.

I support a variety of policy initiatives that provide options for parents and students, including charter schools, public/private partnerships, contract schools, home schooling, cyber schools, historically black independent schools like Piney Woods in Jackson, Mississippi, as well as innovative governance arrangements in the existing institutions of public education.

Such choices enhance children’s access to better schools, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be able to gain the skills necessary for full participation in a democratic society. Without parental choice programs, only well-to-do families have a choice unless they are fortunate enough, like my family, to have benefactors.

We must give low-income and working-class parents the power to choose schools—public or private, nonsectarian or religious—where their children will succeed. And we must give all schools the incentives to work to meet children’s needs. Consider the power of choice in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources. Consider how the absence of choice will continue to consign their children to schools that the affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children.

I still love to see young people “taking it to the hoop.” But I want them to share my passion in the classroom as well. I want them and their parents to have the power to decide which schools can best give them that opportunity and support.

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