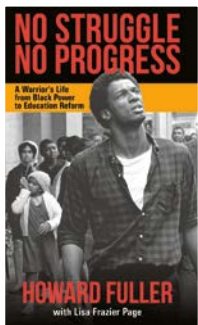


THE ORIGINS *of the* MILWAUKEE PARENTAL CHOICE PROGRAM

Excerpts from
*No Struggle,
No Progress:
A Warrior's
Life from
Black Power
to Education
Reform*



Howard Fuller's memoir chronicles his journey from political activist to school superintendent and back again, revealing along the way the monumental challenge of ensuring that poor black children have access to a high-quality education. The excerpts below begin in the 1980s and detail the origins of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which today enables more than 25,000 low-income students to attend more than 100 Milwaukee private schools.

Many of us in the community were searching for radical ideas that would give poor and working class parents alternatives to public schools that were failing their children, and a proposal to support publicly-financed vouchers that allow children from low-income families to attend private schools emerged. At the time, I knew nothing about the history of vouchers and had never even heard of economist Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize winner



by HOWARD FULLER with LISA FRAZIER PAGE



PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY OF HOWARD FULLER

Howard Fuller with a group of Milwaukee Public Schools students in the early 1990s

who is generally given credit for first suggesting in the mid-1950s that tax dollars for education should follow the child. He argued that such competition for those tax dollars would force public schools to improve.

I'd eventually learn, though, that conservatives, like Friedman, were not the only ones trying to advance the idea of vouchers. By the early 1960s, others on the opposite end of the political spectrum also were making the argument that vouchers were a viable alternative for getting around the bureaucracy and ineffectiveness of many public schools. To me, vouchers just seemed like the next step in a logical progression of the struggle. Our efforts to change the system hadn't worked, and so we had to have a way for low-income parents to opt out of it. Families with means already had the freedom to choose. If they didn't like their neighborhood schools, they had the resources to move their children elsewhere. I believed poor and working-class families should have that same opportunity.

There had been a change in the leadership of the Milwaukee Public Schools with the selection of Dr. Robert S. Peterkin as the new Superintendent. He had named as his Deputy Superintendent, Dr. Deborah McGriff, who had come with him from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where there was a version of parent choice within the school system. Bob and Debbie, both African American, were open to some kind of choice program in Milwaukee, and they met with a number of community leaders, both Black and white, who had been pushing for a choice program for quite a while. The meetings were productive, and Bob and Debbie actually had agreed on some broad parameters for a voucher program to allow low-income parents to access private schools that had a proven record of educating poor children.

But somewhere in the process, the teachers' union got involved and interjected language that was unacceptable to the community.

So, community leaders again turned to State Representative Polly Williams and her assistant, Larry Harwell, who together drafted a bill creating the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Under the program, children from low-income families would receive state aid to attend non-religious, private schools.

Democrats, who controlled the legislature at the time,

did not support vouchers as a party, and Polly had a difficult time even getting the measure heard during the 1989 legislative session. The chairwoman of the State Assembly's Education Committee refused to put the bill on the agenda for a public hearing, but Larry and Polly organized a campaign that included calling the chairwoman non-stop until she changed her mind. The hearing was held at the Milwaukee Public Schools auditorium, and I was involved in the organizing effort that pulled together hundreds of parents, students, and other community members, who packed the meeting room. We selected powerful speakers to represent them. Polly and others did the necessary politicking behind

the scenes, but on the day of the hearing we knew we were still at least one vote short of the majority needed to move the bill out of the committee and onto the Assembly floor. But when it came time for a vote, Kim Plache, a Democrat who had not been supportive of vouchers, astonished her colleagues by voting in favor of the measure.

She said that she could not in good conscience side against so many people in the community. Her critical vote kept the proposal alive.

Polly then worked with State Senator Gary George, a Black legislator who represented the north side of Milwaukee, to get the new program and financing for it included as part of the state budget bill. It would have been impossible to get the program into the pro-

posed budget without the support of Senator George, then co-chairman of the Joint Finance Committee, the legislature's budget writing body. I have no idea what deal Polly and Gary worked out to get his support for including the measure as part of the budget. But if the program had moved forward as a separate measure, it likely would not have passed.

Another important part of this story was the election of Tommy Thompson, a Republican, who had defeated my old boss, Tony Earl, as Governor. As much as I respected Tony, I realized that if he had won re-election, I am fairly certain he would have vetoed the program.

Tommy was a supporter of parent choice and over the years became a huge ally in keeping the program alive. But Polly should get the lion's share of credit for pulling together a coalition of Republicans and moderate Democrats—a group she would later call "The Unholy

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Alliance”—to get the program through the legislature. So, it is important to note that the program, which initially involved just seven schools and 337 children, started out with bi-partisan support.

All of the Black leaders who supported vouchers, most especially Polly, took a lot of abuse from critics, who made all kinds of wild claims, including that conservatives were using us to push their own hidden agenda. But I believe strongly in the concept of “interest convergence,” which my friend, the late Derrick Bell, taught me. Derrick, a scholar and activist who had been the first Black tenured law professor at Harvard University, explained that Black people in this country have made progress only when our interests converged with the interests of people in power. For example, our people made progress during the Civil Rights Movement largely because of our own struggle, of course. But at a certain point, our interests converged with the interests of those in power, who were trying to convince the rest of the world that democracy was a better form of government than communism.

It was certainly hard to do that with Bull Connor siccing dogs on Black people. So, those in power moved to stop those kinds of actions.

I have ALWAYS been clear that some of the people with whom I’ve been aligned on the parent choice issue are in the battle for very different reasons than mine. We do not share the same world view.

We have a temporary merger of interests that don’t necessarily extend beyond parent choice. Nevertheless, when the legislature approved the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program near the end of the 1989 legislative session for implementation in the 1990-91 school year, it was a monumental victory for the parent choice movement.

The Milwaukee movement would experience another major victory six years later when the voucher program was expanded to include religious schools. By then, Republicans controlled both houses of the legislature, and with Tommy, a Republican, still the governor, most people began to view the program primarily as a Republican-led initiative.

Opponents would claim that the inclusion of religious schools among the choices for parents violated the separation of church and state, required by the federal constitution, and they challenged the program in court. The Wisconsin Supreme Court eventually would uphold the decision, and with religious schools among the options for parents, the program began to flourish. That growth would cause some serious battles down the road. There was no denying that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program had given steam to a nationwide movement that was taking off.



Howard Fuller with Bob Peterkin (left), the outgoing superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, on the night in 1991 that Fuller was named the district’s new superintendent

In time, I would find a permanent home in that movement. But first, my life would take a sudden and unexpected turn after Bob Peterkin made a stunning announcement that he was leaving his job as Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent at the end of his contract in June 1991 to take a position at Harvard University.

Sometime before Bob’s big announcement, I got a call from Deborah McGriff, his Deputy, who called to invite me to breakfast. She broke the news that her boss was leaving, and asked if I would support her to replace him. I gave her an enthusiastic YES!! She was perfect for the job—a smart, tough sister who had the credentials and the skills, and I knew she cared deeply about our children.

I'd met Debbie in 1988, soon after Bob, who had been Superintendent of Schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts, brought her from his old administration to help him in Milwaukee. To background themselves on the city and its schools, they read old newspaper stories and talked to community leaders, who told them about my involvement in the effort to create a separate school district. As Debbie later put it, she and Bob knew all about "the crazy Black man who was trying to take part of the school district." She told me that Bob assigned her to meet with me and try to figure out what I wanted. But I clarified my intentions as soon as we met: "I don't know what you've heard about me," I told her. "But I want you to be successful." My fight against the school system had been purely about the kids and what was best for them, I explained. If she and Bob could improve the schools for the children of Milwaukee, especially for poor kids, that's exactly what I wanted. Debbie and I discussed the need for the school district and the Department of Health and Human Services to work together, and we actually became good friends. The two of us were even able to secure a shared \$5 million grant between our organizations to create an innovative program that provided intervention to help keep needy families together and their children out of the foster care system. The program also set up protocols for the two systems to work together on identifying and reporting child abuse of MPS students.

By early March 1991, the Milwaukee Board of School Directors had narrowed its search for a superintendent to two people, and Debbie was one of them. Then, something unexpected happened. I learned from someone I trusted that she didn't have the votes to win. It was never clear to me exactly why, but I was told that some board members were hesitant to hire a woman for the job. It was ridiculous and sexist. I heard that one member even expressed concern privately that Debbie, who is petite in stature, wouldn't be able to break up fights, as if that is among the duties of a superintendent. When it was clear to me that Debbie could not get the votes needed to win, I started listening to some of my supporters in the community who were urging me to throw my hat in the ring. I called Debbie and told her what I had learned and that, because of it, I'd decided to seek the position.

By then, she, too, had heard that the board did not

plan to select her, and she was already interviewing in other school districts across the country. But it still hurt her to hear that I was going after the job. Our conversation ended abruptly, and for a few months she refused even to speak to me. It was never my intention to hurt or betray Debbie, and to this day, I think she should have gotten the job. I just knew it wasn't going to happen, and I didn't want to see someone else from outside our city become the next Superintendent. I also was intrigued by the idea of seeing if, after so many years of being a critic, I could actually make the district better for our kids. At the very least, I knew no one would work harder trying.

The problem with my seeking the job was that I had never worked as an elementary or secondary school teacher or principal. Wisconsin law required school superintendents in the state to have a minimum of three years of elementary or secondary teaching experience and a state license to work as a supervisor in the schools. That stipulation seemed unnecessary for a job that was to me about setting a vision for the district, managing high-level employees, dealing with board politics, handling relationships with the press, the community, and the unions, and most important, using the bully pulpit to fight for kids. I felt that I had been uniquely prepared for the job by my myriad of roles both inside and outside of education, and so I turned to legislators with whom I'd developed good working relationships over the

years to change state law. Fourteen state representatives ended up co-signing a bill that would waive the teaching and licensing requirements for a school superintendent in Milwaukee. Six senators introduced an identical bill. Soon after the measures became public, the NAACP and representatives of five Black church groups held a press conference in Milwaukee to denounce the move. The ministers not only expressed their disapproval of the legislation, but they attacked me personally. When reporters called me for comment, though, I refused to respond. I'd learned long ago not to allow this kind of criticism to creep into my soul. What mattered at the end of the day was what those who were making the decision thought. Another group of ministers held an event at a local church to publicly express their support for me and went to Madison to testify in favor of the

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bill that would allow me to become superintendent. The measure passed easily through the legislature, clearing the way for the school board to interview me for the job.

I knew from the start that some board members had mixed opinions of me. Board President Jeanette Mitchell was one of them. She told me later that she had heard I was very polarizing and jumped from job to job. But she also had heard that I was a dedicated and effective

Schools (MPS), and during the interview I laid out five specific goals that would guide me as superintendent:

- That all children become lifelong learners who maximize their intellectual, emotional, physical, and moral capabilities
- That those who attend college immediately upon graduation do so without needing to spend their first year in remedial classes
- That those who immediately enter the world of work



Howard Fuller, then in his 20s, leads a political rally in Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1960s

leader, and so she decided to keep an open mind. I'm glad she did because she would become one of my strongest supporters. For my first interview, the board arranged a secret meeting in a private room at the Chicago airport. I was surprised to see reporters waiting with their questions as I arrived. I wore my favorite tie, a bright, colorful one with sketches of kids all over it from an organization called "Save the Children." The tie captured perfectly my priority, the children. I had spent many hours thinking of what I wanted for the children of Milwaukee Public

have the skills and attitudes they need to secure at least an entry-level job and receive the same rigorous preparation as those who immediately go on to college

- That some of them develop an entrepreneurial spirit that would enable them to create jobs and wealth for themselves and their community
- That all of them engage in what Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Friere calls "the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate

in the transformation of their world.”

Every child has the capacity to learn and succeed, I told board members, but the school system needed to do more to prepare them. I'd never forgotten my time at Marquette when a young lady from MPS entered the Educational Opportunity Program with a 3.6 grade point average and had never taken a college preparatory course. Even with the program's support, she was not able to enroll in Marquette. The system was failing so many of our children who wanted to go to college but had no idea how inadequately prepared they were. I also discussed my plans to add technical training to the curriculum so that students who had no intentions of attending college graduated from high school at least with skills that would help them land good-paying jobs. But this would be accomplished without diluting the academic rigor of the curriculum.

The board interviewed me a second time at the school administration building on Friday, May 17, but I had no idea they would meet afterward and decide to begin negotiations to hire me. Jeanette made the surprise announcement during a press conference after the meeting. She said the board would vote on my contract at its May 29th meeting. When I walked into my house on the night after my second interview, my telephone was ringing, and there had been so many other calls that my answering machine was full and could take no more messages. Jeanette and several friends were calling to congratulate me.

On the night of the board's final vote, I first served as a disc jockey (one of my favorite hobbies) at a fundraiser for Mayor John Norquist, who was among the public officials who had supported my appointment as superintendent. Then, I headed to the school board meeting in time for the board's vote on whether to extend me a three-year contract. The decision was unanimous, nine to zero. A huge sense of relief and excitement rushed through me, and I jumped onto the stage of the auditorium and shook hands with each board member. I had brought with me two Milwaukee Area Technical College students who lived in the Hillside housing project, where I'd spent part of my youth. My comments to the media afterward were

in part aimed at inspiring them: “I think it's significant,” I said, “that someone from the projects is going to be superintendent of schools.”

I had no time to waste. The new school year was just months away, and the board was already into its new budget cycle. The vote took place on a Wednesday, and I wrapped things up at the county and started as superintendent the following Monday. Even though the public vote was unanimous, it became evident to me right

away that behind the scenes was another matter. During my first strategy meeting with the board shortly after the vote, I was not even allowed to speak. I sat there the entire time, ready to present my “Strategy for Change,” and none of the board members asked me a single question or recognized me to say a word. The tension was thick, and I was fuming. The next day, I wrote an open letter to the board and sent it to the newspaper. In it, I threatened to quit if I were not treated with more dignity. Jeanette then convened a closed meeting for the board members and me to talk. Some of the members were downright angry that I had been selected. Jeanette told me later that I had been able to get enough votes to win primarily because I was local. Bob's departure after just three years had stunned and upset the board, and my supporters argued that I would be more vested in the system since I had grown up in Milwaukee and was a product of its public schools. That swayed enough undecided members to give me the majority, but there was lingering resentment. My opponents complained that I had

tried to destroy the school system with my leadership role in the North Division and independent school district controversies and my support of parental choice. But they were outnumbered and had felt pressured by their colleagues, the community, and the media to vote for me and put forth a united front in public. During our private meeting, some of them questioned me vigorously about how my support for parental choice would play out in my role as superintendent. They would not stand for me to be out advocating for parental choice, while at

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feature

CHOICE IN MILWAUKEE FULLER

the same time trying to lead the school system, they said. But I pushed back, telling them point blank that I would never denounce educational options for parents or even say that I was not supportive of choice. As a compromise, though, I agreed that since I was now the superintendent, I would not discuss parental choice publicly or advocate for it. I assured the board that I wanted what they wanted: a better public school system to help all of our children to be more successful. When the nine board members and I finally stepped out of the meeting together three hours later, some of them were wearing T-shirts bearing my

Elementary. I had visited the school in January to speak to the students about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in honor of his birthday. When the students heard that I had become superintendent, they and their teacher wrote and invited me back for another visit. I decided it would be the perfect way to start my new job. From the moment I stepped into the classroom and saw the students' cheery faces, I couldn't help smiling. They reminded me of why this job was so important. They were relying on those of us in charge to make sure they were ready for a world they could barely even envision. I wish they knew how much I wanted to do



Howard Fuller at a high school graduation ceremony of CEO Leadership Academy, at the time a private school that students could attend through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. In 2011, the school converted to a charter called Milwaukee Collegiate Academy.

photograph and the words “Join Dr. Howard Fuller in the Crusade to Save Our Children.” The shirts had been made during my time with the county when I organized an effort to get the community more involved in ending child abuse.

I moved right into my role as superintendent. The first day was full of the kind of ceremonial stuff that takes place when there's a change of administrations. But it was important to me to visit a school, and so five hours after being sworn into office at city hall, I made my way to Granville

my part and give them the best opportunity for success. I encouraged them to do their part by aiming high: “Each one of you can go on to college,” I told them. “Each one of you can go on to be whatever it is you want to go on to be.”

Dr. Howard Fuller is professor of education and founder of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. He is board chair and cofounder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options. He married Dr. Deborah McGriff in 1995.